

# CHRISTIAN COLLEGE PRIZE PLAYS

Edited by

MARY F. HASTINGS REED

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# CHRISTIAN COLLEGE PRIZE PLAYS

EDITED BY

MARY PAXTON KEELEY

*English and Journalism  
Christian College*

VOLUME I

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1934



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Christian College



*To*  
the Christian College playwrights,  
those who have gone,  
those who are with us now,  
and those who are yet to come,  
this first volume of plays  
is dedicated



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## FOREWORD

The purpose of the volume, "Christian College Prize Plays," is three-fold. First, it is our hope that the young playwrights will be encouraged to continue their literary efforts by seeing specimens of their work in print. This is based on the time-worn maxim that nothing succeeds like success. Since these plays have been prize winners, have been successfully produced, and finally have been regarded as worthy of publication, the young playwrights may well conclude that their efforts have met with success. Second, progress is possible only when proper records are kept. This volume will serve as an accurate and permanent record of the efforts and achievements of Christian College students in this particular field. Third, literary attainment can be regarded as a success only when it has been made available to a reading public. This volume will make available to the reading public the plays of Christian College students.

Playwriting at Christian has become one of the most vital and animated activities in the literary work of the college. The increased interest in writing plays during the past few years may be attributed largely to two factors. Foremost is the leadership of the instructor, Mary Paxton Keeley. The first woman graduate of the School of Journalism of the University of Missouri, she has had varied experience as a newspaper writer, author, and teacher. Her literary achievement, her dynamic personality,

and her capable instruction serve as an inspiration to students who have ambition and talent in the field of writing.

The contests in which the students have had an opportunity to enter their plays have served further to foster the interest in play writing. The one-act play contest sponsored annually by the Dramatic Arts Club of Columbia and which is open to all Columbia college students has been especially popular because of its local appeal and the interest of faculty members of the University of Missouri. Other contests in which Christian College students have received recognition are the Missouri Intercollegiate Folk Play Contest and the Zeta Phi Eta National Playwriting Contest.

May future students be inspired to even greater achievements by this volume, the record of some of the attainments of Christian College playwrights.

J. C. MILLER  
Dean of the Faculty  
Christian College

## PLAYWRITING AT CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

Playwriting at Christian College is based on the simple principle that the dramatist must know the people and places of whom and of which she writes; therefore, she must search into her own life for material.

With the emphasis on this principle, regional plays have been very largely the result. From Oklahoma have come plays that concern themselves with the problem of the Indian and his relations with his white neighbor and plays of the oil fields; from Missouri, farm plays like *Alsace in Missouri* and small-town plays such as *Women in the House*; from the plains of Kansas, a cyclone play, with a setting in a cyclone cellar, and a play about Carrie Nation from her home town; from Iowa, a play telling of farm picketers; from Nebraska a play of the early days in a soddy.

Every college freshman has been required to write one play. The plays that have been written, some six or seven hundred in the last five years, have not all been outstanding, but it is surprising how many of them have been good, producible plays, and it is also remarkable the number that show real insight into the human heart. It is this skill in characterization that makes much of the Christian College work above the average, for upon sound and penetrating characterization must be based the claim of any play to permanence.

The plays published in this volume are not all of the Christian College plays that have been produced or received

recognition; these published here are simply typical of the best plays that have been written at Christian, but there are a number of others that are interesting for many reasons.

*The Small Towner* by Harriet Scranton, which won honorable mention in the Dramatic Arts Contest of 1930 and which was produced at Christian College, concerns itself with the problem of the small-town girl who comes home from college thinking that she is too good for her family and her old friends.

*Epilogue* and *Is Breakfast Ready* by Doris Melton and *Moments of Happiness* by Louise Bronaugh were awarded honorable mention in the Dramatic Arts Contest of 1931. *Epilogue*, a rather powerful play of the next war, was produced by the College for a Missouri Workshop audience; *Is Breakfast Ready* and *Black Tragedy* by Trevelyn Jones were given at Christian; *Moments of Happiness* was performed by the Missouri Workshop.

*A Good Woman* by Aletrice Rutherford was presented as one of the five best plays in the 1932 Dramatic Arts Contest, where it was awarded fourth place. It is a grim satire on a Missouri small town funeral. *Women in the House* by the same author has been included in this volume instead of *A Good Woman* because the former play has been produced more often.

*Oklahoma Crude* by Claudine Elliott is an amusing skit of two picturesque old men. It is to be produced at the Missouri Workshop.

*Light* by Laura Allee and *The Birthplace of a General* by Doris Melton and Mabel Lou Wilson were awarded honor-

able mention in the Dramatic Arts Contest of 1933. The first is a tragedy of the building of the Lake of the Ozarks and the second is a comedy about the dispute over the birthplace of General John J. Pershing.

*The Last Flight Over* by Allean Lemmon, *Pickets* by Doris Melton, *Blackfoot* by Maxine Wallace, *Fried Cakes* by Helen Marie Clary and *Maggie's Heritage* by Mary Augusta Bratton were awarded honorable mention in the 1934 Dramatic Arts Contest. These are to be produced next year in the Missouri Workshop and at the College.

*The Snow Queen* by Elizabeth Provin Wood, which is to be produced next year, is a poetic dramatization of Andersen's romantic fairy tale.

It is often asked why so many more tragedies than comedies are written by college students. As a matter of fact, good comedies are rarely written by anyone, and comedy is a product of maturity. If the plays in this volume seem too tragic to have been written by such young dramatists (only one of the six is a comedy and that a comedy based on an old tragedy) the reader should remember that there is certainly not more than one comedy to every five tragedies in any volume of one-acts. It is extremely difficult for any playwright to write strong comedy, for it is impossible for humor to tug at the heartstrings of an audience as tragedy does.

There was no intention when these plays were written of making them plays for women, but women characters predominate in all of them except *The Hero*, and three out

of the six have all women casts. For that reason these plays are suitable for women's colleges and club programs.

Acknowledgment is made to Dr. Robert L. Ramsay of the English Department of the University of Missouri, whose untiring efforts have been responsible for the Dramatic Arts One-Act Play Contest, now in its thirteenth year, which contest has been the inspiration of many of the Christian College Plays, and to Prof. Donovan Rhynsburger, Director of the Missouri Workshop, whose gracious cooperation has made it possible for many of the Christian College plays to be produced at the Workshop.

MARY PAXTON KEELEY

# THE HERO

By

ALLEAN LEMMON



## ALLEAN LEMMON

Allean Lemmon, author of *The Hero*, was graduated from Christian College in 1933. Her play won first prize when it was produced with four others in the Dramatic Arts Contest, May, 1933, and it tied for first place in the Zeta Phi Eta National Playwriting Contest.

The plot germ of *The Hero* came from a newspaper clipping about a forest fire from which the people escaped death by means of rowboats on the lake. This is a grim play, a play with a terrible idea back of it, but it is motivated in such a way that it seems reasonable for the heroine to do as she does. There is power here and real pathos.

Allean Lemmon in her senior year at Christian won the Phi Theta Kappa literary prize for her short story, *Paper Roses*. That year she was chosen Microphone poet. In her first year in the University of Missouri she won second prize in the Mahan Essay Contest for her essay, *Musicale*, first honorable mention in the 1934 Dramatics Arts contest with her play, *Last Flight Over*, and honorable mention in the McAnally Essay Contest. She was awarded the Francis Scholarship.

Miss Alma Hill of the English faculty of Christian College directed *The Hero* when it was produced at the Missouri Workshop with the following cast:

STELLA . . . . .	*Carolyn Collier
EMMY . . . . .	Lucile Parker
BERT . . . . .	John Paxton
WILLIE . . . . .	John Paxton Keeley
OLD MAN . . . . .	Frank Hobart Gearhart

\*Awarded prize for best actress in contest.

## CHARACTERS

STELLA

EMMY, *her sister-in-law*

BERT, *her husband*

WILLIE, *a neighbor boy*

JONES, *a neighbor*

ANOTHER NEIGHBOR

OLD MAN

## SCENE

*Somewhere in the Wisconsin woods during a forest fire. The plain little kitchen of Bert Martin's house.*

## TIME

*Toward evening in the late fall.*

## THE HERO

(When the curtain rises the room is unlighted except by the lingering daylight and a red glow at the window. Throughout the play a forest fire is approaching and the dim roaring sound of it is heard constantly in the distance.

*Stella Martin enters right, her arms full of bedding. She deposits her load on a chair by the door. Then she crosses swiftly to the stove, secures a match, and comes back to the table. Her movements indicate that she is under the pressure of excitement. She removes the chimney from a kerosene lamp standing on the table and lights the lamp. Her hand trembles so that she can scarcely hold the match. She replaces the chimney and clasps her wrist as if to force her quivering nerves to be quiet. There is a knock at the outside door.)*

EMMY. Stella, it's me.

(*Stella opens the door to admit a thin, grey woman of about fifty, who is carrying a suitcase and a carpet bag.*)

STELLA. Hello, Emmy.

EMMY. You aren't all packed yet, are you? (*Sets suitcase down*) I recollect Bert spoiled your satchel totting fishing tackle home in it last summer and we had these two grips left, so I just says to Maw, "I'll run take 'em over to Stella."

STELLA. Thanks, we do need some. (*She takes the bags, placing the small one on the table and the other beside the straight chair.*) Do you think we'll have to go to the lake, Emmy? When I was out half an hour ago, the men thought they were getting the fire turned.

EMMY. Well, I just saw Pete Brown, and he said he

reckoned it was getting nearer. Anyhow, it don't hurt none to be prepared. Say, where's Bert?

STELLA. He's out with the men. Sit down, Emmy, while I pack these things. (*Emmy seats herself in the rocking chair on the left. Stella walks into the bedroom.*) I don't know just where to begin.

EMMY. You better take the things you'll need the worst. We packed up the bedding and all the food we could carry and them things like the picture album and Maw's black silk dress that she's going to be laid out in, and those tomato pickles we made this summer—I told her we should leave those go, they're such a nuisance to carry. But she said if the pickles stayed, she'd stay too. Maw's awful stubborn sometimes.

STELLA. (*Re-enters, carrying clothing*) It all seems like a dream. That red sky and the smoke and that awful rushing, cracking sound. (*Sits down across from Emmy*) I feel like it's not a fire at all, but a horrible beast that is coming nearer and nearer until he'll tear the roofs from over our heads and swallow us down. (*She laughs shakily*) I suppose I'm nervous.

EMMY. Yes, you do act pretty shaky, but it won't do no good to worry about it. If the fire leaps the ditches they've dug, we can get to the lake in no time. We'll be safe there.

STELLA. Yes, but our buildings will be burned!

EMMY. Oh, I ain't saying it ain't a calamity. But that's what a body has to expect if they live in a God-forsaken place like this. There's one good thing about it—we can't lose much. We haven't got no furniture to speak of, and

our houses ain't no account. We can save all the livestock and we can carry everything we just have to have.

STELLA. All the same, it scares me. Well, if we've really got to pack, there's some stuff in the cellar I must bring up. I'll be back in a minute, Emmy. (*Crosses to cellar*)

EMMY. You'll have to hurry faster'n you've been doing if you expect to get ready. We may have to go to the lake anytime.

(*Stella goes down. The cellar door bangs behind her. Emmy stoops, picks up some of the bedding and folds it up. Stella is heard coming up the stairs. She tries to open the door but cannot.*)

STELLA. (*Calling*) Here, Emmy, open the door for me!

EMMY. (*Going towards the door*) What in the world's the matter with the thing? (*tries to pull it open*) This thing is sure stuck tighter'n a bear in a honey-tree!

STELLA. Push down on it!

EMMY. (*After further straining she succeeds in jerking it open*) There!

(*Stella sets down the box she was carrying and brushes her hair back from her forehead exhaustedly.*)

STELLA. It's a good thing you were here, or I'd have been trapped down there. (*Examining door*) It's that new door we had put in, and it always has been too big. When it gets slammed shut, it sticks so you can't open it coming up.

EMMY. Looks like Bert could fix that.

STELLA. He's going to, when he gets around to it.

EMMY. Humph! (*The very set of her shoulders expresses disbelief*) When he does! (*Returns to her chair*)

STELLA. (*Closing the door carefully and going back to her chair.*) I wish Bert would come back and tell us about the fire.

EMMY. (*Glancing at her swiftly*) Did you say he was out with the men?

STELLA. Why, of course.

EMMY. The fire must be getting turned away, then. It wouldn't be like him to stay out there and fight it if it was a question of saving his own skin.

STELLA. Emmy, you're too hard on Bert. He's not a coward.

EMMY. You always stand up for him, don't you? Well, he's my brother and it ain't pleasant to say it, but I'm not so blind I can't see but that Bert Martin is a lazy, lying, shiftless, sneaking cur—

STELLA. Emmy!

EMMY. —with no more backbone than a jelly-fish! I don't see why you stay with him, Stella, when everybody knows how he treats you. You work harder than any three women put together while he sits in that slat-bottomed chair and smokes, or goes galavanting around with that bird-dog of his. I heard he was up at Todd's store drunk Saturday night.

STELLA. It's not true! He may drink once in a while, but he doesn't get drunk. Emmy, I'll have to ask you not to come

over here if you're going to talk that way about Bert. None of his kinfolks understand him. Maybe he doesn't work much, but he's awful handy about trapping game and bringing me a good mess of fish. And he's brave as any man.

EMMY. (*Dryly*) Yes, I know how brave he is. I remember when he was fifteen, he tied sharp tins onto my cat's tail and then run away for fear she would scratch him.

STELLA. I know that if he had a chance Bert would show you he is brave. He isn't afraid for himself.

EMMY. Not much, he ain't!

(*There is a sound of heavy footsteps at the back door. Bert enters. Stella rises to meet him.*)

BERT. Hullo, Emmy. Say, Stell, have you got everything packed?

STELLA. I just now started to pack. What about the fire, Bert? Can you keep it back?

BERT. We don't know yet. It's come a lot closer. Gosh, it's hard on a man digging ditches all day.

EMMY. Yes, it must be a new feeling for you.

BERT. Aw, lay off nagging me, Emmy. Can't you be pleasant to me even in my own house?

EMMY. Not with you in it I can't. What'd you come back for, anyway? Have the men stopped digging?

BERT. No, but they was going on about a quarter of a mile, and I got a sore foot that was hurting me, so I thought I'd come on home.

STELLA. You rest in that chair, Bert, while I fix you some coffee. Then you can go on back with the other men.

BERT. Never mind the coffee, Stella, I need something with a little more kick to it than that. I tell you it's hard on your nerves staying out there and chopping trees and digging ground all afternoon. (*He goes to cupboard, pulls out bottle and starts to drink.*)

STELLA. Please don't do that, Bert. Not before you go back with the men.

BERT. (*Replacing bottle*) Who says I'm going back with them? What I'm going to do is get down to the lake in time to get in that good rowboat. And you'd better hustle getting those things packed if you want to come along.

EMMY. I guess I'd better be going. I'm glad to see you don't get drunk Bert. And that you're bearing up so brave-like through all the danger. (*Rises and starts toward door with Stella following.*)

STELLA. He's joking, Emmy. He always pretends like this when you or Maw are around because you aggravate him. He's going to rest a few minutes and then go back with the men. (*Bert looks dubious. He pulls a pipe from his pocket and lights it.*) Thanks for helping me, Emmy. (*She opens the door for Emmy.*) Oh, it must be getting nearer! The air smells smokier and the sky is brighter. If they don't get the fire turned back, can you and Mary get Maw down to the lake all right? I could send Bert—

EMMY. No, we'll get along. Stella, I think you need to get yourself some spectacles, so you can see what's going on around you!



Photograph by The University Photo Service



STELLA. I don't think so, Emmy.

EMMY. Well, I do.

STELLA. (Calling after her) Goodbye!

EMMY. Goodbye.

STELLA. Bert, I wish you wouldn't drink when your sister's here.

BERT. Aw, Em's an old maid.

STELLA. She'll go home and tell Maw and Mary you were drinking and then they'll say hateful things to me the next time they see me.

BERT. Well, you don't need to listen to them.

STELLA. But how can I help it when they talk like they do about you? It hurts me, Bert, to hear them call you names and see you not caring.

BERT. Oh the Martin women always was good at tongue-lashing. There sure ain't much love lost between us.

STELLA. But it makes people think it's true—when your own blood and kin say what they do against you, and you don't do anything about it.

BERT. What do they say about me?

STELLA. That you're lazy, that you never do anything but hunt and fish and sit around, that you get drunk, that you're a coward—

BERT. And I suppose you just set there and smile and agree with them.

**STELLA.** You know I don't. I've always stood up for you no matter what they said. I've always said that you were just different from the other men around here, and that you would be as brave as any if the time came to test you out. (*Crosses to chair by bedroom and picks up bedding.*)

**BERT.** Well, don't you believe it?

**STELLA.** Oh, of course I do. (*Returns to table where she stands and packs.*) But I'm tired of shouting it at them all the time and having them look at me like I was crazy. If you'd do something just once, to show them that they're all wrong.

**BERT.** What do you care what people think as long as you know it ain't true. It's too much trouble trying to suit everybody's notions.

**STELLA.** That's what you always say, Bert. I used to think it was big and fine of you to stick to your own ideas and let people go their way, but I'm beginning to wonder—

**BERT.** (*Whiningly*) I might of known you'd listen to everybody else and believe them before your own husband. You're all down on me, that's it.

**STELLA.** I'm not and you know it! (*Still packing*) You just like to feel sorry for yourself. How can I tell them you aren't shiftless, when you won't ever do even little things around the house. There's that cellar door. I've asked you to fix it and I've asked you to fix it. It's stuck so you can't open it from the inside if you let it close. I went down there a while ago to get some things and if Emmy hadn't been here to open it, I'd have been there till Kingdom Come.

**BERT.** I told you I'd fix that door when I had time.

**MAID**

STELLA. You've got nothing but time! Well, I suppose it won't matter much anyway if the house burns down.

(*There is a tattoo of knocks at the back door and Bert slinks into the bedroom. A boy's voice is heard.*)

WILLIE. Mrs. Martin!

(*Stella half-opens the door; the boy remains outside.*)

WILLIE. Mom said she thought Bert wasn't home and I should tell you about the fire. It's got to Morrison's place. My pop and my uncle and a lot of others is over there fighting it.

STELLA. But that's not a mile away! Were there ditches there?

WILLIE. Yes, but a wind's coming up and the fire might jump them. The men started a backfire but they don't think it'll do no good. Mom says we got to go to the lake any time now.

STELLA. I pray we won't have to. Thanks for coming and telling me, Willie. (*Closes the door.*)

BERT. (*Coming back in*) What did he say about the fire? It's reached Morrison's?

STELLA. Yes, but it hasn't jumped the ditch. Bert, you've got to go help them fight it.

BERT. Don't be a fool, Stella. We have to get to the lake before dark—if the wind gets high, it'll reach our place in half an hour.

STELLA. You don't know what you're saying. We can't run off to the lake while all the others are sweating to keep the fire across the ditch!

BERT. Like hell we can't! Get your stuff together quick, Stella. If we can get that rowboat that don't leak we can be out in the middle of the lake before the fire gets near.

STELLA. That's a coward's trick, Bert. We can't go till the others do. Listen, I've stood up for you, I've told them you were brave if you just had the chance to prove it. I almost drove your sister out of the house because of the things she called you. Now you've got to act like a man and go help cut off that fire!

BERT. It ain't that I'm afraid, Stell. But it's a mile over there, and by the time I get there with this sore foot—

STELLA. You're lying to me, Bert Martin. I've lied for you plenty of times, but you don't need to stand there and try to pull the wool over my eyes. If you don't go there now, you'll be the laughing stock of the place. You've stayed away too long already.

BERT. Aw shut up, Stella, and help get our things together. (Crosses to door and takes the coats from their hooks).

STELLA. Emmy was right. I've been a blind fool. You're everything she said you was. You're a cur—a mean, shiftless, lying, spineless cur—afraid of your own shadow—(*her voice rises to a hysterical scream.*)

BERT. Say, you cut that out, Stell. (He advances toward her threateningly.)

(*There are footsteps and voices outside and heavy raps at the door. As Stella goes to open it, Bert flings the coats over the rocker and hastily crosses to the cupboard, out of the visitors' range of vision. The newcomers are two men, grimy and rough-looking.*)

JONES. You'd better be getting yourself to the lake, Mrs. Martin. The fire's jumped Morrison's ditch.

STELLA. Oh! (She is quick to hide her surprise) Yes, Bert just came to tell me.

JONES. Bert here? I thought he was out working on the ditches.

STELLA. He was until a minute ago.

JONES. It's just as well. (During this speech of Jones Bert takes a bottle from the cupboard, and starts sneaking towards the bedroom.) He can come with us to warn the Henshaws. Their place is trapped between Morrison's and the ridge and the fire is coming down on them in a V. They won't know it's jumped the ditch, and they'll probably have a lot of stuff they'll want to get out. (Noticing Bert) Come on, Bert. It's getting dark, and we'll have to hurry.

BERT. It won't take more than two to warn the Henshaws.

JONES. I told you we'd have to help carry their stuff. And Grandma Henshaw's there in bed with the rheumatism—we'll have to get her out. Of course, if you're afraid to come—

(The other men laugh; Bert looks uneasy.)

BERT. I'm not afraid. (He makes no movement to go. Stella is standing tensely, gazing at him with burning eyes which act as an irresistible magnet to draw his own.)

JONES. Well, come on, then. If we hurry, we can get there in no time.

(The men go out. Bert jerks his eyes away from Stella's and follows the others slowly. Stella slams the door. As she

watches a minute from the window, the stern, tense look on her face changes to one of relief and joy. She commences to pack rapidly, gathering up the garments about her and piling them into the suitcases. She starts to the cellar once, but looks at the door dubiously and closes it again. Then she goes to the stove and starts to make coffee, her hands moving deftly and a look of happiness on her face. The red glow at the window has become more pronounced. Its ghastly light permeates the room. A man's voice is heard at the door.)

OLD MAN. Bert! Bert Martin!

(Stella flings open the door, shrinking back at the heat which floats in. The caller carries an unlighted lantern.)

STELLA. Bert isn't here. (Proudly) He's gone with the others to warn Henshaws.

OLD MAN. (Surprised) He has? Well, it don't matter. What I stopped for was to get a light for my lantern. I was rounding up them hogs we let run in the woods, and the wind sprung up so strong it blew out my light.

STELLA. Here, I'll give you a match. (Goes to the stove and returns with a match which she hands him. He kneels to light his lantern, holding it before him on the chair.)

OLD MAN. I tell you, Mrs. Martin, I'm scared of this wind.

STELLA. I don't see why it had to come. If it hadn't been for that they might have checked the fire.

OLD MAN. Well, there ain't no checking it now. (Rising and going towards the door.) It's going to be a mighty bad night. Thank'ee Mrs. Martin.

STELLA. Here, let me give you some more matches in case your light goes out again. (She does so.)

OLD MAN. Thank'ee Mrs. Martin. (He leaves.)

(Stella continues *per packing* feverishly. She takes all the utensils except the coffee pot and tea kettle and dumps them into the box near the door. She is back at the table closing her grips, when the boy's voice is heard again. There is a note of panic and excitement in it. Stella throws open the door quickly. The wind blows her dress back, and thin smoke wreathes in.)

STELLA. You again, Willie?—Why, what's wrong?

WILLIE. When the folks got to Henshaws the fire was already there. A wind come up and the smoke house was afire. Their house caught right away, and we had a terrible time getting Granny Henshaw out.

STELLA. Willie, what happened? Is it—something about Bert? (She seizes the boy by his shoulders. He tries to evade her eye.)

WILLIE. Yes, mom, he—well, he was there, and one of the men says he seen him going in the house—he was going after something of Grandma Henshaw's and—

STELLA. Is he hurt?

WILLIE. The roof fell in!

STELLA. (She covers her eyes and groans as she sinks into chair) Oh, poor Bert!

WILLIE. I got on the Henshaws' mare and come right over. None of the men could leave yet, so Mr. Jones he told me to come right over.

STELLA. Are they sure Bert was caught?

WILLIE. Ralph Higgins said he could swear to it. And when they looked around as much as they had time for, they couldn't find no sign of him. Mr. Jones says to get your coat on and your stuff together. Will you be all right if I ride over to fetch Miss Emmy?

STELLA. (*Dully*) I'll be all right.

WILLIE. Sure you won't faint or nothing?

STELLA. No, I won't faint.

WILLIE. Then I'll go bring Miss Emmy to stay with you. Better get your coat on.

(He goes out, relieved at having his unpleasant duty over, but excited with his own importance. The room is now becoming murky with smoke and the red glare from the window lends everything a menacing, bloody cast. Stella is sitting with her head bowed—a scarlet statue. The coffee on the stove starts to boil over and mechanically she gets up to move it off. The door opens softly but rapidly and a bowed, grimy figure sways in. Stella whirls about. It is Bert, evidently in a state of semi-drunkenss.)

STELLA. Bert!

BERT. Now, what are you screaming at? Get your coat and let's get down to the lake before that gets us. (He glances apprehensively over his shoulder towards the red window.)

STELLA. I thought you were dead.

BERT. Well, I'm not, but I soon will be if we don't get out of here.

STELLA. Didn't you go to the Henshaw's?

BERT. Sure I did. But when we got there the place was on fire and the smoke was rolling out enough to suffocate you. It was like walking into hell.

STELLA. So you turned around and sneaked back.

BERT. Yes, I did. Why shouldn't I?

STELLA. (*Ominously*) Yes, why shouldn't you?

BERT. Would you rather I'd burned up?

STELLA. I don't know.

BERT. You ought to be glad\* to see me back.

STELLA. Oh, I am. I'm tickled to death. Everybody thinks you've been killed helping to rescue the Henshaws. They'll be here any minute to tell me you're really dead and what'll they find—you rushing around, trying to save your puny, yellow skin.

BERT. Aw, shut your mouth!

STELLA. And now that boy's gone over to get Emmy and tell her what a hero you are and she's on her way over here to comfort me—we're going to weep together over losing such a fine husband and brother.

BERT. Are you coming with me, or do you want to stay here and roast?

STELLA. Oh, I'll stick by you. I've been doing it for twelve years and I'll keep doing it until you get so rotten you just naturally fall to pieces. Come on, let's get to the lake before the mourners get here.

(She straps the bags and puts them on the floor, as Bert picks up their wraps. Stella turns out the lamp, throws the tablecloth over her arm, and, taking a suitcase in each hand, moves towards the door. Bert stops.)

BERT. Wait, I've got to have a drink before I go. I can't face it with my nerves like they are now. (He pulls out his bottle) Hell, it's empty!

STELLA. Come on. You're drunk now.

BERT. I tell you, I won't go without another drink. There's some in the cellar, ain't there?

STELLA. Oh, I suppose so. (She sets down the bags. Bert slams open the door and stomps down the stairs. Stella stands where she is and watches as the door bangs shut. Suddenly her listlessness gives way to interest and a shrewd look comes into her eyes.) Yes, of course; it's in the cellar!

(The clinking of glass is audible, muffled and indistinct. Then Bert is heard lurching up the steps. He tries to push the door, but it will not budge. He pounds and hammers on it and calls out in a thick voice.)

BERT. Stella! Open this door! Say, Stell, let me out of here!

(She remains immovable, staring at the door as though fascinated. There is a desperate shower of blows, then the panicky voice subsides into a hoarse, animal murmur. There is another clink of glass as if someone is drinking; then the sound of a bottle rolling down three steps to smash on a fourth. There is a muttered, drunken curse and a heavy thud, as of a body falling. Two faint groans sound, and all is still. Stella has not changed her position or expression. The red glare of the fire

*reflected on the floor, throws into relief her high cheek-bones, giving her a grotesque, cruel look.)*

*(There is a murmur of voices at the door, and a timid knock. Then it opens softly. Smoke rolls in behind the hesitant group. Emmy is in front, with Mr. Jones and the boy, Willie, close behind her. The two other men remain outside. Emmy walks swiftly to Stella, puts her head on the woman's shoulder, and sobs silently. Mr. Jones and Willie gather up the boxes and grips and hand them to the men outside.)*

EMMY. You was right all the time, Stella. He was brave when he got the chance.

JONES. I'm afraid we'll have to go, folks. If we don't leave right off, we'll have to run for the lake.

WILLIE. Are you leaving anything?

STELLA. No. . . Nothing that matters.

*(She has not moved. The glare is now intense and the room is filling with smoke so that the people are almost indistinct. Jones pushes Willie before him towards the door.)*

JONES. (Pausing) He died a hero, Mrs. Martin.

STELLA. (With her eyes still on the cellar door) A hero!

*(She closes the door softly behind her as she goes out. The room is black with smoke. There is heard an indistinct sound of movement from behind the cellar door. Bert's voice is heard once more, so choked and muffled that what he cries is almost unintelligible.)*

BERT. Stella! Stella! (The voice ceases and all is still as the curtain falls.)

CURTAIN



D U S T

By

ALETRICE RUTHERFORD

LOUISE BRONAUGH

MADELINE DUNSFORD

LAURA ALLEE



## DUST

*Dust* was an interesting experience in collaboration. To the four members of the class in Creative Writing the plot germ of *Dust* was given. Each member of the class wrote a scenario, and the best was taken from the four scenarios and combined in one. Then each member of the class was assigned a character and detailed characterizations were written.

After some months of working on the characters and plot, the class met and dictated the play, each member giving the speeches of the character she had selected. The play was then read before the dramatic club and revised with the criticisms of the club in mind. It was next produced before a local group and revised after production. It won the gold trophy in the Missouri Intercollegiate Folk Play Contest of 1933, and honorable mention in the Dramatic Arts Contest of 1932.

*Dust* was directed by Miss Louise Freeland, head of the dramatics department of Christian College, with the following cast:

MATTIE . . . . .	Erma Green
FANNY . . . . .	Virginia Horr
SETH . . . . .	Frank Hobart Gearhart
JESS . . . . .	John Paxton
RUBY . . . . .	Dorothy Ellen Risor

*Dust* was produced at the Southeast Missouri State Teachers College December 1933 and June 1934.

## CHARACTERS

MATTIE, *a spinster*

FANNY, *her fat half-sister*

SETH, *the sexton*

JESS TURNER, *a hired man*

RUBY, *his ten-year-old daughter*

## SCENE

Pleasant View Cemetery, a country cemetery in Atchison County, Missouri. The scene is in front of the gate. A four foot cedar hedge conceals the graves from the audience.

## TIME

About eleven on a raw November day.

## DUST

(As the curtain rises the stage is empty, the sound of clods falling is heard. Mattie comes in right in front of hedge. She looks around and hears Seth digging. Mattie is a thin spinster, who wears her hair on top of her head in a knot like a peeled onion. She is dressed in a black wool fascinator, old seal skin sacque, and black high-top laced shoes. Her shirtwaist is thin and her skirt is black serge. She wears pinched glasses, plain gold rings, one set with turquoise, and a breast pin of hair flowers. Her hair is streaked with gray and she looks as if she has worked very hard.

(Seth, the sexton, is a small man with a wispy moustache and bushy eyebrows. He wears an old dirty red sweater, striped pants, and floppy hat. He has a deep voice. He has more force than one would think by looking at him.)

MATTIE. Seth, you, Seth. (Thumps show that he either does not hear her or is trying not to) Seth, Seth. (He keeps on digging, not answering) Seth, I know you are there. I hear you. You might as well come out.

SETH. (Back of wall right) Come on in here, Miss Mattie. If you want me to get this grave dug in time for the funeral, you'd better let me go on and dig it.

MATTIE. You come right on out here.

SETH. (Back of wall right) Come on in here, Miss Mattie. I can't stop to talk now.

MATTIE. Aren't you working for me? You come right on out here.

SETH. (*The shoveling stops*) All right, all right, no use a arguing with a woman, leastways not with you, Miss Mattie.

MATTIE. I suppose Fannie's been out here already?

SETH. No, she ain't been out here yet. I didn't see how either one of you would get the time to get out here this morning. Wasn't expecting to see either of you till this afternoon. (*Seth scrapes the dirt off his spade while he is talking to Mattie*)

MATTIE. I came out here to see that you're digging the grave where you was told to. Pa always said he wanted to be buried on the north end of the lot by Ma.

SETH. But Miss Fanny done told me to put the grave on the south end of the lot by her Ma.

MATTIE. There, caught you in a lie, Seth, when you're digging my own Pa's grave. I thought you said Miss Fanny hadn't been here this morning.

SETH. I ain't told no lie, Miss Mattie. She ain't been out here this morning.

MATTIE. Well, who told you the grave was to be dug on the south end of the lot then?

SETH. I got my orders to change this morning.

MATTIE. Who was it give you orders to change? I'm the one you're a working for, ain't I?

SETH. Miss Fanny's husband done sent word that there was a mistake and the grave was supposed to be put on the south end of the lot. That's all I know. I ain't got time to

be digging graves all over the lot, Miss Mattie. I got to get to work.

MATTIE. I knew it. I knew it. Fanny just couldn't leave her fingers out of the pie. Well, I guess since I'm Pa's first born, I'm the one to say where he's to be laid away.

SETH. (*Starting back toward grave*) I've got no time to fool if the grave is to be ready. I can't dig up the whole lot fer you. I've had to dig that grave for the Turner baby first thing this morning. I ain't got no time to go around digging all over the place.

MATTIE. What Turner baby?

SETH. You know, he's that hand of Alf Meyers.

MATTIE. I didn't know they had a baby.

SETH. It just come Tuesday.

MATTIE. Well, they got plenty of kids without it. What did it die of?

SETH. I guess it was born too puny to live.

MATTIE. Is old man Meyers going to let them bury it there in his lot?

SETH. Seems like its ma was set on having it laid away in a nice plot that'll always be tended to.

MATTIE. Too much fuss to be making over a baby that mighty near didn't live at all.

SETH. Well, I got to get back to my digging. (*He goes back to digging the grave behind the hedge at right.*)

MATTIE. I tell you, Seth, there's no use in your keeping on with that grave. It's got to be changed.

SETH. Too late to change now. 'Tain't four hours till the funeral.

MATTIE. Get some more men in. I'll pay them.

SETH. (*Keeping right on digging*) Got no time to get any.

MATTIE. He's going to be buried on the north end of the lot if the funeral has to be held over till tomorrow. You might as well, because he couldn't rest peaceful less he was buried by Ma.

SETH. He was never let live in peace; (*Mumbles*) so I suppose you won't let him. . .

MATTIE. You're just wasting your time going on with that grave, Seth. I'm the oldest. I was Pa's favorite. Fanny might have been pretty when she was young, but she's never been a comfort to him.

(*Fannie comes in left. She is a fat disagreeable-looking woman, with four chins and more coming. She has been pretty, when she was young. She is wearing a large straight, black wool coat and a black feather boa, a hat with a black bird on it. She has black frizzy hair and wears orange rouge. She has a cracking voice, and when she is mad, it is neither high nor low. She has overheard the last remark.*)

FANNIE. Mattie Hawkins, I suppose you're trying to tell Seth that you was a comfort to Pa.

MATTIE. I took care of him for the last twenty years, didn't I?

(*Seth is seen in the background going to left stage to see about other grave.*)

FANNY. And you got a home and a good living for doing it.

MATTIE. I give up my best years to him.

FANNY. Your best years. He only kept you out of pity for you. You was an old maid with no place to go when Ma died. Poor Pa, skinny as a rail, (*Seth returns to stage right*) with your feeding him nothing but corn meal mush three times a day. If it hadn't been for coming over to my house on Sundays and getting a square, he wouldn't have lasted as long as he did.

MATTIE. You know his plate never fit, and you trying to kill him with blackberry pie and such truck as you fattened yourself on, and he always got seeds between his teeth. Seth, just stop digging that grave, I'm the one to say about that.

SETH. These woman folks. Don't do no good to listen to 'em. Can't please them nohow. (*Louder voice*) Can't dig graves all over the place, Miss Mattie.

FANNY. No use in your trying to stop his digging, Mattie. He's had his orders.

MATTIE. But I'm the one to say. Pa trusted me, and I'm going to do right by him. I suppose you've gone round behind my back and changed the funeral arrangements.

FANNY. Since you didn't take the trouble to consult me about the arrangements, I thought I might do a little arranging of my own.

MATTIE. (*Suspiciously*) What you done now?

FANNY. I asked Brother Grundy from Burr Oak to come and conduct the services. I got a right to have a say-so about Pa's funeral, I guess.

MATTIE. I like that. Pa was a strict Baptist, and it just makes me sick after I've worked so hard, and me a-grieving so, making arrangements that Pa wanted and then for you to try to come in and turn everything upside-down at the last minute. I don't know how I carried on at all, I'm so broken up and worn down with nursing him.

FANNY. Yes, folks has been commenting on how broken up you are, gadding about just like nothing and Pa not even in the ground. I just don't feel like seeing people myself, but I have to get out and see that his wishes are carried out. Brother Grundy was Pa's pastor.

MATTIE. (*So mad she sputters*) His pastor! He kept going there because you nagged him if he didn't go. He always went to the Beau D'arc Methodist until your Ma kept after him, and he only went there because it was closer. I suppose you've tried to put your foot in about the music, too.

FANNY. Well, since you want to know, I asked Sister Griffith if she wouldn't sing the first two verses of "Rock of Ages."

MATTIE. Sister Griffith! You know Pa always said she sang like pigs squealing under a gate. She's not going to sing at Pa's funeral if I have to go and tell her to her face that she's not wanted.

FANNY. I asked Sister Griffith to sing because she always sings in the Rebecca Lodge.

MATTIE. Rebecca Lodge. Humph! I didn't go dragging in all the ladies of the Star.

FANNY Well, nobody could blame you for that.

MATTIE. You've got a lot of room to talk. What about your loyal member, Gertie Jinkins' daughter—regular road walker.

FANNY. Well, I could tell you plenty about the ladies of the Star.

MATTIE. You needn't bother. And what's more you needn't think the Odd Fellows are going to have a thing to do with this funeral. You'll be telling me that you've asked the Odd Fellows to take charge at the grave.

FANNY. Well, I've done just that.

MATTIE. Then, Sister Fanny, you can just tell them not to bother about coming, because I've already notified the Masons and Pa already has his white apron on in the coffin.

FANNY. Well, I never did! You should be wanting the Masons when all they sent is a stinking little spray of pink carnations and the Odd Fellows sent that everlasting wreath with the emblem on it.

SETH. Well, I never did hear sech. I don't see how the old man lasted as long as he did.

MATTIE. Pa was a true Mason. He only joined the Odd Fellows so's you could be a Rebecca; not even a member loyal like me could get you into the Star.

FANNY. No such thing. All my friends was Rebeccas. After Pa got in he liked the Odd Fellows best, and just as

soon as Pa got low, it was the Odd Fellows that come and set up with him.

MATTIE. Yes, trying to get him to leave the lodge something.

SETH. Your Pa never went to no lodge. He heard enough of bickering at home to go to any lodge. (*Shakes his head*) I declare I ain't never heard nothing like this in all my days.

FANNY. None of your put-in, Seth.

MATTIE. You might just as well change the grave now, Seth.

SETH. For onct and for all, I ain't going to change the grave. You can do what you like with your Pa, but I ain't going to change this grave. I feel like I'm going to be in it myself in a minute.

MATTIE. Unless you dig that grave where I tell you, we're never going to bury him.

SETH. You going to take him down to the ice plant?

MATTIE. Such disrespect to the dead. }  
FANNY. Seth, I never heard such. } (*Together*).

SETH. (*Spitting tobacco juice over the wall*) Disrespect!

MATTIE. Humph!

SETH. Humph! (*Goes toward baby's grave.*)

FANNY. Keep right along with that grave, Seth. I got to get home and see about placing my organ.

MATTIE. Organ! Where'd you get an organ?

FANNY. Pa always promised me the organ; so, I just sent John over after it, and he's home with it now.

MATTIE. You snaking hussy, going into my house before Pa is cold and snatching my organ.

FANNY. Pa always promised it to me, and I knew you'd never let me have it.

MATTIE. It wasn't his to promise. It was Ma's. She bought it with the egg money, and she left it to me.

FANNY. A likely lie, Mattie Hawkins. I learned more'n to trust you. You've always been jealous because I was handsomer than you and 'cause I got a husband, and you never even had a beau.

MATTIE. I sacrificed myself for Pa.

FANNY. You was forty years old when you started to sacrificing yourself.

MATTIE. Better to marry than to burn. (*Turns to go in to look at grave.*) Myself, I think it's better to be a good Christian woman than to get husbands like some women do. (*Goes behind wall*).

JESS. (*Outside*) Seth.

SETH. Hey.

(*The women stand glaring at each other, each afraid to leave. Jess comes in followed by Ruby, who stands just behind him. Jess Turner is a hired hand, who can't even raise a good crop of whiskers. He looks consumptive. He is bald and has a hat too big for him. He wears an old dark suit that does not fit. In the South he would be called "poor white". Ruby Turner*

*(is a pitiful child of ten with straight, stringy blonde hair. She wears a faded red jacket that is too small for her, especially too short in the sleeves, black ribbed stockings, high black shoes, pink wool stocking-cap, and yellow muffler tied around her neck. She has neither gloves nor handkerchief.)*

JESS. Seth, did you get the grave dug?

*(Seth talks over the wall, left, to Jess.)*

SETH. Yep, it's fixed.

JESS. Mary wanted a preacher, but I ain't been able to find one who could come. Both of 'em I asked said they was getting ready for another funeral, and I couldn't pay them nothing.

SETH. Well, Jess, the baby didn't live long enough to have a funeral preached over it.

*(Fanny appears in gate, having heard voices.)*

JESS. Maybe not, but Mary will be sure broke up that I didn't get nobody to say a prayer or something. She was set on it.

SETH. *(Scratching his head and looking puzzled)* I'd like to accommodate you, Jess, but I don't see what I can do about it. *(He looks to the women, but they don't seem sorry.)*

JESS. I can't hardly go home and tell her nobody said nothing over the baby.

SETH. Course I seen lots of funerals, and I know what to do, but I couldn't say nothing out of my head.

JESS. Well, I'll go bring the box out of the wagon. Ruby, you stay here.

(Ruby sniffls and has strayed out to the front and looks rather pitifully up at the women, who have stopped glaring at each other and look somewhat sympathetically at her.)

SETH. (Calling to Jess) Hold on a minute, Jess. I member seeing a book that one of the elders read out of at Tom Walker's little girl's funeral last summer. I think I seen that book in the tool house the other day. You get the box, and I'll see if I can find it.

JESS. You stay here and be a good girl, Ruby. (He goes out back and Seth goes into the tool house. Mattie slowly comes in gateway to see what Fanny is up to now.)

FANNY. What's your name, honey? (Hands her a handkerchief, and Ruby wipes her nose.)

RUBY. Ruby. (Fanny pantomimes talk with Ruby, brushes her hair back under her cap, etc.)

FANNY. That's a right sweet name. I'm afraid you're cold. (She takes a pin from her dress and pins up the child's coat. Ruby tries to put her hand in her sleeve) Do you know where I live? (Child nods) You come over tomorrow and I'll get you some mittens.

SETH. (Coming out of the tool house) This book is kinda confusing. Don't know whether I can find the place. (Thumbs it through rather bewildered.)

MATTIE. Here, give it to me. I guess I can find it for you, Seth.

SETH. (Handing it to her) Yes'm. (They look at book as they stand in gate. Ruby and Fanny are at stage left) Guess this here's the part they always read.

JESS. (Comes back from behind the wall) Did you find the book, Seth?

SETH. Yes.

RUBY. Is this where you're going to put the baby?

(Jess with the little girl near him stands in the gateway. The women draw closer. Fanny takes the child's hand, and reaches down and wipes her eyes. Mattie stands rather grimly by, but becomes more and more affected as Seth reads.)

JESS. That's all right now, Ruby.

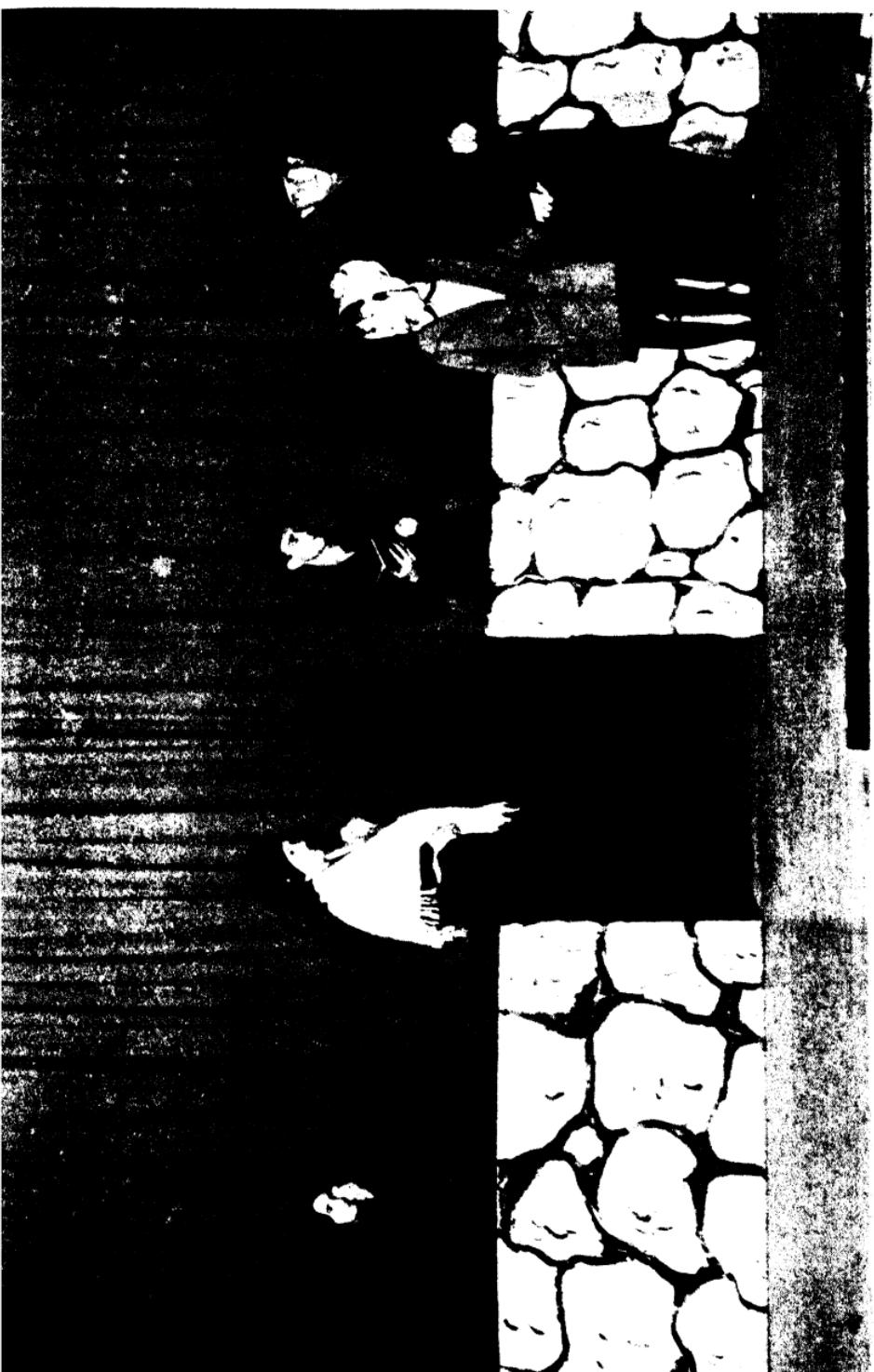
SETH. You hold this book, Miss Mattie. Jess, if you'll just help me. . .(Business of lowering casket) Now, Jess, if you'll step around here. (Seth clears his throat, picks up some dirt for the "ashes to ashes," begins from Prayer Book) Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down like a flower. He fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. In the midst of life we are in death. Unto Almighty God we commend the soul of our daughter departed and we commit her body to the ground; (Pause, Seth drops earth on casket) earth to earth; ashes to ashes; dust to dust. (Seth kneels and the others follow) Most merciful Father, who hast been pleased to take unto thyself the soul of this child, grant to us who still in our pilgrimage and who walk as yet by faith, that having served thee with constancy on earth, may be joined in glory everlasting; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

ALL. Amen.

JESS. Is that all we do now, Seth?

(They rise and Fanny helps the child up.)

from DUST as it was produced by the SOUTHEAST MISSOURI TEACHERS COLLEGE. MATTIE, FANNIE, RUBY,





SETH. Yes. I'll take care of the rest, Jess.

JESS. Come on, Ruby. Mary will be much obliged to you, Seth.

SETH. That's all right.

JESS. Come on, Ruby. Let's go home. (*Ruby smiles faintly at Fanny.*)

FANNY. Ruby, don't forget about coming around tomorrow. Goodbye.

RUBY. Goodbye.

(*Jess and Ruby go off back and Seth starts to shove the clods on the grave. Mattie and Fanny turn sheepishly to each other.*)

FANNY. Well, Mattie, we never let Pa live in peace, maybe we'd better bury him in peace.

MATTIE. (*Wiping her eyes.*) Yes, I guess we can have both the Masons and the Odd Fellows.

FANNY. The Masons at the Church and the Odd Fellows at the grave.

MATTIE. What do you mean? We'll have the Odd Fellows at the church and the Masons at the grave.

FANNY. I s'pose you're trying to manage Pa's funeral again.

(*Curtain closes slowly as the two sisters start into an argument, but not as bad a one as at the beginning.*)

MATTIE. I guess I've as much right as you if there's any managing to be done.

FANNY. Now look here, Mattie. . .

MATTIE. Look here yourself, Fanny.

CURTAIN



# MOON BUMS

By

DORIS MELTON



## DORIS MELTON

While she was still a freshman in high school, Doris Melton won third place in a national Farm Bureau One-act Play Contest with her play *Dad Comes Across*. In her first year at Christian two of her plays, *Epilogue* and *Is Breakfast Ready* won honorable mention in the Dramatic Arts Contest. The following year *The Birthplace of a General*, on which she collaborated with Mabel Lou Wilson, won honorable mention in the same contest. *Moon Bums*, which was produced with four others in the 1934 contest won second place. Two of her stories won honorable mention in the 1934 Mahan Short Story Contest at the University of Missouri. She has also written poetry of some distinction.

*Moon Bums* is a grim play of atmosphere based on the fundamental theme of hunger. It is reminiscent of some of the Russian one-acts. Some of the material in it comes from an article *Women Are Hungry* in the American Mercury for March 1934.

When it was produced at the Missouri Workshop May 10, 1934, it was directed by Miss Florence Doolittle with the following cast:

FRAN . . . . .	Peggy Elsea
ETHEL . . . . .	Elizabeth Ann Dickinson
NANCY . . . . .	Ernestine Hibbler
ANNA . . . . .	Patsy Compton*

\*Awarded prize for best actress in contest.

## CHARACTERS

*FRAN, one of the Moon Bums*

*ETHEL, the other Moon Bum*

*ANNA, an old woman*

*NANCY, an unemployed school teacher*

## SCENE

*The scene is a secluded spot beneath a railroad trestle on the outskirts of a large middle-western city. The effectiveness of the scene depends largely on the background. It should seem isolated, and yet the city is an integral part of the set and situation. Smokestacks are visible at the back. There is an entrance at the right leading to the city and one at left leading to the river. The train comes from the left and passes overhead. There is a small fire near center and bits of rubbish and brush are strewn about. The glow of the fire seems only to accentuate the bleakness of the scene.*

## TIME

*A cold winter night. A cold dim moon.*

## MOON BUMS

(When the curtain rises, the stage is empty. A small fire glows faintly. Anna enters, back right, goes to the fire and holds out her trembling bony hands. She is an old woman, but not so old as she looks. She is probably somewhere in her late fifties. She is bent and somewhat deformed because of a long time lack of proper nourishment. She wears an old wool dress which nearly drags the ground, and a shawl. Her head is bare, and her long grey hair straggles down over her stooped shoulders. She is grotesque—repulsive.)

ANNA. Even the fire is cold. (Suddenly, with a fierce, yet hopeless kind of hate, she spits into the fire.) That is not right. Nothing is right in the world but the Bible. (Takes from beneath her shawl a very old, ragged copy of a Bible) And then even the Lord's book does not tell the truth sometimes. (There is a blast of wind that blows her shawl, and she shivers violently.) My God, it is cold. (She goes right near the trestle and its shelter from the wind. Spreading her shawl out she sits stiffly leaning against the trestle. Her face is lifted, and the moon shines on it. She begins to sing—no particular tune or words, but there is a weird melody in it. It might be the song of her own unhappy life.)

(Fran and Ethel enter right back, carrying bundles. They do not see the old woman at first, but go at once to the fire. Fran squats down and holds her hands near the fire.)

(Fran is a very thin, Botticelli looking girl with her head drooping a bit on her fragile body. She is wiry, tough, and hard. She might be sixteen, and she might be twenty. She wears overalls, and two or three old sweaters, and an old cap.

*Ethel is somewhat younger than Fran, very thin and weak. She is almost ill with a sore leg which she scraped badly on the gravel when thrown recently from a freight car. She limps as she walks. She is not so attractive as Fran, rather dull, dependent on Fran for the initiative. She is dressed about the same as Fran.)*

FRAN. Well, we're off again.

ETHEL. Yeah, we're off.

FRAN. Squat down here near the fire, Ethel. It ain't very warm, but it helps.

ETHEL. (*Squatting beside her and holding out her hands*) Seems like I'll never be warm again. Seems like I never was warm.

FRAN. Aw hell, you'll be warm by this time tomorrow. That freight's a-comin' in before long, and it's headin' south. We're gonna go places on them cars.

ETHEL. Yeah, I guess it won't be so hard when we get south.

(*Anna's voice which has almost subsided rises suddenly in a long, weird wail. Fran and Ethel start and turn toward Anna.*)

ETHEL. What's that?

FRAN. It's that old sister we seen uptown. Guess she's crazy. Don't pay any attention to her.

ETHEL. I wish she'd shut up. She gives me the creeps. (*Takes off outer sweater, drops it on the ground, and starts to sit down, but suddenly doubles over with pain*) Oh boy—oh my God, Fran!

FRAN. (*Awkwardly sympathetic*) You leg hurting you much, kid?

ETHEL. (*Sitting down carefully and stiffly*) Oh, it ain't nothin'. Just kinda makes me sick at my stumick sometimes.

FRAN. Maybe there's a hospital here that'll fix you up.

ETHEL. Aw, it ain't bad enough for that. You have to be pretty near dead if you're a bum before they'll take you in. Besides, we can't hang around here no longer. That cop give us twenty-four hours.

FRAN. Oh him. He can go to hell. We gotta have that leg seen to.

ETHEL. There ain't no use talking, Fran. I ain't a-going to no hospital. I don't want none of them hospital guys nosing into my business. Maybe they'd put me in one of them homes. (*Passionately*) I ain't a-going to one of them homes, Fran.

FRAN. O. K. kid, fergit it. You'll be all right, when we get south.

ETHEL. (*Without hope*) Yeah, I'll be all right.

FRAN. (*Leaning toward her*) Look, Ethel, what I got. I saved 'em for us.

ETHEL. Oh gee, Fran, where'd you get 'em?

FRAN. A coupla guys threw 'em down right in front of me when we was uptown. They ain't no more'n half smoked. I swiped some matches up there in the depot. (*She lights cigarette.*)

ETHEL. (*Taking a long, slow drag*) Boy, this is swell, Fran.

FRAN. (*Stretching out on the ground beside Ethel*) Oh, this ain't such a bad life, kid. Damn sight better than working in the factory. It's healthier. (*She smokes thoughtfully, looks up at the sky*.) Moon's kinda pretty tonight, ain't it?

ETHEL. Yeah. (*After a pause*) Only—

FRAN. Only what?

ETHEL. Oh, nothing, only it seems so kinda far away. (*Takes drag*) Like it don't know we was here.

FRAN. That's because it's so cold. The moon's always kinda dim when it's so cold. The stars are brighter though.

ETHEL. Yeah, they're awful bright tonight. (*They smoke in silence. Anna's voice becomes audible again. She speaks, slowly and carefully, with a slight accent.*)

ANNA. (*She is quite mad. She talks to herself.*) It's all in the Bible. You cannot live by bread alone. You can't make bones with just bread. (*Gets up and comes near girls, who draw back, half frightened.*) It's worse for you, my children. You are so young.

FRAN. Oh, we weren't born yesterday.

ANNA. (*Coming very close and peering down at them*) I can see you now. I was wrong. You're a hundred years old.

ETHEL. (*In a loud whisper to Fran*) What's she talkin' about?

ANNA. (*Returning to the fire*) It says it all in the Bible—under your own tree, it says. Every laborer is worthy of his hire. Every man should be under his own tree and should be paid at sundown—(*Her muttering becomes unintelligible.*)

FRAN. She's batty.

ANNA. (Shouting) My God, everybody knows you can't make bones out of water. Doesn't everybody know you can't make bones—a woman can't make bones without the stuff to make it in her?

FRAN. (Rising and speaking in a loud, frightened voice) For Cripe's sake, can't you shut up?

ANNA. (Now very calm) You think I'm crazy, don't you? You think I'm nothing but a crazy old woman. You don't know how I've worked all my life with these hands and these arms; I've sent seven children through high school, and now I don't have enough to eat. There are hundreds of mothers who have done the same thing. There used to be women back there in those flats—they kept walking back and forth in the halls—their faces were swollen and their bodies were all out of shape. (Shouts) My God, they must be crazy to have a baby now. If they knew what I know, they'd cut those babies out with butcher knives—

ETHEL. (To Fran) She kinda scares me—

ANNA. Oh, you must not be frightened. I'm not going to hurt you. You must not mind an old woman like me. I'm not going to bother you. I just came in by your fire to warm my hands. It's good to warm your hands by a fire sometimes. But I shan't bother you. No, no, I shan't bother you. (Goes back to place against trestle, huddles up again, and mutters over her Bible. After awhile she falls asleep.)

ETHEL. I hope she don't talk no more. She gives me the jitters.

FRAN. I guess she's gone crazy because she's so hungry.

ETHEL. Well, she can eat slops like we have to.

FRAN. Yeah, that's right. Folks like her ain't got no more right to be fussy than we have.

ETHEL. I'll say not.

FRAN. All the same I don't much blame her for not wanting to eat garbage. Gee, I'd like to have a good square meal again.

ETHEL. Gee, you know what I'd like to do. I'd like to walk right into one of them cafes (*She pronounces it with emphasis on the first syllable*) and sit at one of them tables with walls around 'em.

FRAN. Them's booths.

ETHEL. Well, I'd sit right down at one of them booths and I'd order a full meal—roast beef and potatoes and brown gravy and maybe some strawberry ice cream.

FRAN. And some chocklit eclairs.

ETHEL. What's them?

FRAN. Well, I don't know. They're something swell to eat. When I was a kid, I used to read some of them fancy magazines and they'd be eatin' chocklit eclairs lots of times. I used to read a lot of stuff when I was a kid, Ethel.

ETHEL. I never learned how to read very good.

FRAN. Well, I just kinda picked it up by myself. I liked to do it. I was a funny kid, I guess. I had some big idears about what I was agoin' to do when I got grown up. (*Laughs wistfully*) Christ, I must have been a crazy little devil.

ETHEL. Look up there. (Points down left) There's someone comin' down this way.

FRAN. (Looking) Yeah, looks like she was comin' down here. She can see the fire. I was afraid it was too bright.

ETHEL. Well, I don't care if it is. It's gettin' us warm.

FRAN. Say, that dame don't look like a bum. Bet she's one of them crazy social workers.

ETHEL. Yeah, I bet that's who she is, all right.

FRAN. Well, I don't want to see her. Remember that one that talked to us up in Minneapolis? Boy, she was a batty one.

ETHEL. Boy, she sure was. I nearly bust out laughing right in her face. Trying to tell us how to get along. Boy, that was a laugh all right.

FRAN. Them women get paid for pokin' their noses in poor folks' business. Let's get out of here before this one sees us.

ETHEL. We might miss the cars if we leave. Besides, she might give us something. Some of 'em are pretty soft that way. There was that one that give us a dollar.

FRAN. Well, all right, we'll stick around. I'd do most anything for a dollar.

(Nancy enters, right back. She advances toward the fire, and addresses the others timidly. She is a school teacher, for months unemployed. She is thin like the rest and half starved although she looks pretty good until one gets close to her. She is about twenty-three, far above the others in intelligence and refine-

ment, yet rather common and pathetic. Wrapped tightly around her is a fur coat, her most prized possession. A rather ugly coat. One does not notice at first that the fur is worn thin, that her silk hose are full of runs, and her shoes are run down and shoddy.)

NANCY. I beg your pardon, but is this where the freight trains come in?

FRAN. What's it to you?

NANCY. Excuse me for bothering you, but there was a man up the street who told me the cars stopped here.

FRAN. Yah, and maybe he was right. What you so interested in the freights for? Expecting a package, maybe. (*Laughs loudly.*)

NANCY. I thought maybe—well, I thought maybe I'd catch a ride. (*Anna awakes, gets up and comes over to fire. She stares at Nancy, fascinated by the fur coat.*)

ETHEL. You'd what?

NANCY. Oh, you know what I mean. What is it they call it—hop a freight?

FRAN. Aw, say, quit your kiddin. We don't have to be hit by a street car.

NANCY. (*Puzzled*) I don't know what you mean.

FRAN. We mean you can't feed us a line about you hopping a car. What do you want with us?

NANCY. (*Very earnestly*) Really, I'm not kidding you. I do want a ride on one of those freight cars tonight. I want to get out of here. I can't stand it here any more.

ETHEL. Well, there's more ways of gettin' out of here than on one of them freights. There's a Pullman goin' out tonight, ain't there?

NANCY. You don't understand. I can't take a Pullman. I haven't any money.

FRAN. Hell, you got a fur coat, ain't you? Pawn shops is still runnin' I reckon.

NANCY. (*Passionately*) I can't sell my coat.

FRAN. What's the matter? Why can't you?

ETHEL. I bet it's made from her pet pony. (*She and Fran laugh.*)

ANNA. Do not heckle the child. She is unhappy enough.

NANCY. (*Turning toward Anna*) Oh, thank you. I am unhappy. I should sell the coat, I guess, but it means a lot to me. It's the only nice thing I ever had. I worked so hard to get the money for it. You see, I'd always wanted a fur coat. Even when I was a little girl, I wanted a fur coat. I saved and saved and went without things and finally I got it. Besides it's not worth much now and it's the only coat I have.

FRAN. You could get enough to feed you for awhile.

NANCY. Yes, but after a while I'd be hungry again.

ETHEL. (*Curiously*) Are you hungry now?

(*Anna comes close to Nancy, reaches out a hand and feels the coat.*)

ANNA. Yes, it is real fur.

NANCY. (With pride) Of course it is.

ANNA. It would make me young again to dress in fur. Once I had a fur cloak for those cold Sweden winters. I used to ride through the snow and wear my furs and sing. There was those who said my voice was a beautiful thing, but even my voice is gone now. (*She seems to have forgotten them again, starts offstage, right back, and begins to sing. She sings only a few hoarse notes and stops and turns back*) You see my—voice is like an unkind ghost. That is what living has done to me—it has taken all I have. (*Singing in a low voice, she leaves, right back.*)

ETHEL. I hope she don't come back.

NANCY. Who is she?

ETHEL. Oh, she's just an old woman that don't have no home to go to. She's nuts—starvin to death, I guess.

NANCY. It takes a long time to starve to death, doesn't it?

FRAN. Yeah, I guess so. They just keep hangin' on somehow. There was some kids that starved to death near us one winter. I thought they never would die. It seemed like they was dead a long time before they was.

NANCY. (*Shivering*) Sometimes I am afraid I will starve to death.

FRAN. Did you ever try eating garbage?

NANCY. Oh, I couldn't.

FRAN. Oh, it ain't bad after you get used to it. You'd be surprised to see the good grub some folks throw away.

Why the other day we found a whole sackful of oranges that was just half rotten.

NANCY. It would make me sick.

ETHEL. Well, it made me sick the first time I ever et it. It just kinda gagged me.

NANCY. It's funny how you get to feeling when you're hungry. Some friends invited me out to dinner the other night—about a week ago, I guess. They didn't know how bad off I was. They had so much to eat and I was so hungry that I forgot where I was. I just stuffed the food in. They kept servin' it to me. I guess I was so hungry I forgot my table manners—and afterwards I was sick because I had eaten so much. (*Her voice breaks, she puts her hands to her face, is almost crying.*)

FRAN. Seems as though you could get a job.

NANCY. I tried but I couldn't.

ETHEL. Did you try the State House?

NANCY. Yes, this morning. It was horrible. There was a man who kept yelling questions at me. I couldn't think, I was so hungry. I just kept saying—"I don't know—I don't know"—(*She is crying now.*)

FRAN. Say, listen, don't let it get you. Here, sit down and rest yourself.

NANCY. Thank you. (*She sits*) You're very kind.

FRAN. (*Embarrassed*) Oh, it ain't nothin'.

NANCY. Is that train coming in pretty soon?

ETHEL. It oughta be here any minute now.

NANCY. Where is it going?

FRAN. I don't know where this car goes. I only know it's heading south and that's enough for me.

NANCY. Maybe things won't be so bad down south.

ETHEL. Well, it'll be warmer anyhow. Boy, last winter we stayed in Chi and like to froze to death.

NANCY. Were you bumming last winter too?

FRAN. Oh, we been moon bums for two years now.

NANCY. Moon bums?

FRAN. Yeah, that's what they call girls like us—girls who bum the cars. We didn't ride the freights much last winter though. There was a coupla fellas that had been carpenters in Chi and they let us live with them in some old dry goods boxes.

NANCY. You mean—you actually lived in dry goods boxes?

ETHEL. Sure, we lived in 'em. The fellas fixed 'em up so they wasn't half bad only the wind uster blow right through them some nights.

FRAN. One of the fellas froze his hands one night, and we had a hell of a time about that. He was sick for more'n a week, and it was hard for the other fella to do the foragin' all by himself.

NANCY. Foraging?

ETHEL. Yeah, moochin'. The fellas uster go into town and do the begging and things like that, and we did the cooking

and kept the shack picked up. The fellas had to do the mooching because a man ain't picked up in the city like a girl is.

NANCY. Oh. But these men—did you—well, did you live with them?

FRAN. Hell, we didn't sleep with them, if that's what you mean.

NANCY. It must be pretty hard.

FRAN. Boy, it ain't honey and pie. You get slapped and kicked around plenty and it's root, hog, or die. A girl don't have it no worse than a boy, not as bad maybe, because there is some terrible homes on the road, and it's bad all right. You got to roost anywhere and be ready to high tail it any old time.

NANCY. Don't you ever try to get a job?

ETHEL. Say, no more jobs for me. There's nothin' to it, workin' your guts out. My folks did it and look at 'em, they ain't no better'n if they'd been bummin' all their lives.

FRAN. Boy, that's right. We don't want no jobs or no husbands—not them that marry our kind. A fella can't get a job now the way I see it. And we don't want no kids neither. We've seen too much of what happens to kids nowadays. I should stand around like my ma did and see my kids thin as rails and going up like a puff of smoke every winter, all that blood and work going up. There's nothin' in it.

*Photograph by The University Photo Service*  
Scene from *MOON BUMS*, as it was produced by THE MISSOURI WORKSHOP. ANNA (Patsy Compton); FRAN (Peggy Elsea); NANCY (Ernestine Trubler); ETHEL (Elizabeth Ann Dickerson).



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NANCY. It scares me to think about it. What do you do—just run and jump on?

FRAN. It's pretty hard. We'll help you though. You have to be careful or you'll fall. That's the way Ethel hurt her leg—she didn't get a good hold and fell down on the gravel. If you fall under the cars it's goodbye.

NANCY. Either way, it will be better than staying here. If I stay here, I'll starve to death. I know I will. I'd rather do anything than starve to death.

FRAN. Oh, you'll make it all right.

ANNA. (*Staring into the fire*) I can see them so plainly—low, deep fires burning for us and our youth and our loves. We used to lie on the grass beside them, and the moon would shine down—such a bright moon and warm—(*She stares up at the moon now shining*) Not far away and cold like you—(*Screams*) My God, but you are cold!

(*Nancy, nervous, springs to her feet, and goes toward the old woman.*)

NANCY. Oh, please—please don't scream like that!

ANNA. (*Placatingly*) You must not mind me, my dear. It will be better if you do not listen to me at all. I do not listen to myself anymore. I can feel these strange, mad words I speak, but I do not dare hear them. If I heard them, I should go mad.

ETHEL. She don't make sense.

(*Anna kneels by the fire and takes out some scraps of food and begins to gnaw on them.*)

FRAN. She's eating. (*Stares at Anna hungrily.*)

ETHEL. Cripes, I didn't know I was so hungry.

NANCY. I wonder if she's got very much.

ETHEL. Looks like she had plenty in that bundle.

FRAN. Yeah, looks like more'n enough for her.

(The three girls stare at Anna. Their thin bodies stiffen as extreme hunger gradually gains complete control of their emotions and actions. Fran speaks; her voice is high and unnatural.)

FRAN. Hey there, old woman! How about a hand-out?

ANNA. (Seeming not to notice them) Ah, it is good to sup by the fire.

(Fran goes up to the old woman, clutches her by the shoulder. Anna draws back instantly, seems to snarl.)

FRAN. Ain't you goin' to give us none of that?

(Anna's eyes have turned sly and bright. Her mouth has twisted into kind of a leer, and she looks evil, grotesque. Fran lets go of her shoulder but is too hungry to be afraid.)

ANNA. (Holding tightly to her bundle) I have only a little.

FRAN. (Screaming) You got enough for us, you old hog, you. Here, give me some. (Reaches out her hand, but Anna turns away, holding the bundle close to her breast.)

ANNA. No, it is mine. There is not enough for you.

FRAN. Oh, ain't there? (She grabs at the bundle. They claw at each other. Ethel jumps over and joins in the struggle.)

ANNA. (Screaming wildly) You can't have it—you can't have it—oh my God——

NANCY. (She has been watching with horrified fascination.) Oh, please—please don't— (The others ignore her. Fran and Ethel get some scraps and turn away, doglike, to eat them. They eat like starved animals.)

FRAN. (To Nancy) Well, get some. She's got plenty.

NANCY. No, no, I couldn't. (She stands very still, watching the three as they claw at the bundle of food which has now fallen to the ground. There is the sound of the freight's whistle, not far off. The rumble of the cars is heard.)

NANCY. (Hysterically) There it comes! There comes the freights! (She loses her nerve completely. She trembles and turns pale, is almost ill. Fran and Ethel react differently; they lose the peculiar hunger-madness which has possessed them and become themselves again. They hurry to put on their sweaters, pick up their bundles.)

FRAN. Your leg feel all right, Ethel?

ETHEL. Yeah, it don't hurt now. I can make it all right.

FRAN. The cars is gettin' pretty close.

ETHEL. Well, come on. (Starts to leave.)

FRAN. No, stay here out of the wind. It slows down back there a-way, Takes it a long time to come up that grade.

ETHEL. How do you know? We ain't never been here before.

FRAN. Sure, we been here before. I don't know when. I remember this here big trestle and the smokestacks stickin' up just like that. (Points) And the freights a-draggin' up the grade and the old bullgine a-tootin'. (The whistle sounds,

*very loud now.)* There she comes, kids. Come on, we're off.  
(Starts to leave; notices Nancy, who hasn't moved) Come on, you. We'll help you.

NANCY. I—I can't.

FRAN. What's the matter? Scared?

NANCY. I don't know. I guess so.

ETHEL. Aw, listen, you'll be all right. It kinda scares me too, and I been doin' this a long time. My stumick always kinda caves in when the cars drag in. (Shouts above noise of the train) They're right here, Fran. I can hear the cars crossin' the river.

NANCY. Where is the river?

FRAN. Oh, it's right over there. (Points left) Come on, let's go. (She starts running, waving her bundle. She is followed closely by Ethel who can move pretty fast in spite of her bad leg. Nancy is unable to move. Fran turns, falls back.)

FRAN. Come on! You'll miss it! (Exit Fran and Ethel. Nancy remains standing still. The roar of the train gets very loud, and then gets fainter. Very soon, it is quiet again.)

ANNA. It is hard to think when the trains go by.

NANCY. (In a strange, choked voice) Where did they say the river was? (Anna does not answer. Nancy goes to her and touches her shoulder. Her voice is almost a scream.) The river? Where is it?

ANNA. It's back there a way. (Points left) It is very cold, that river. Sometimes I think I will drop my tired old body in,

but always it is too cold. It would be a quiet way to die, with no blood.

(Nancy takes off her fur coat. She moves wearily, weakly, yet with a determined kind of desperation. She has given up all hope. She goes to Anna, and holds out her fur coat.)

NANCY. Here. This is for you.

ANNA. (Staring) Heh?

NANCY. Take it. You look cold. I won't need it any more.

(Anna snatches the coat, clutches it to her, strokes the fur ecstatically. Nancy walks wearily left, leaves in the direction of the river. Anna squeezes into the fur coat, holds it tight about her, walks proudly down front, singing again. This time the song is almost glad.)

CURTAIN



# **WOMEN IN THE HOUSE**

By

**ALETRICE RUTHERFORD**



## ALETRICE RUTHERFORD

Aletrice Rutherford's play *Women in the House* was produced as one of the best five in the 1931 Dramatic Arts Contest and was awarded fourth place. Her play *A Good Woman* was produced in the 1932 contest and awarded fourth place. *Women in the House* was awarded the Phi Theta Kappa prize in 1931, and her story *The Strangest Day* was awarded first Phi Theta Kappa prize in 1932. Two of her stories were awarded honorable mention in the Mahan Short Story Contest of 1934 at the University of Missouri.

Both of this writer's plays are plays of character and deal with the same theme, the unjust domination of one woman in a family over the other members.

*Women in the House* was produced March 1932 at the Old Court House under the auspices of Art League of St Louis, and in December 1933 at the Southeast Missouri State Teachers College, Cape Girardeau.

At its premier performance it was directed by Mary Jane Houston, a senior at Christian College, with the following cast:

SARA . . . . .	Elizabeth Ice
SUSAN . . . . .	Ruth Idsardi
MARTHA . . . . .	Margaret Goodson
ELIZABETH . . . . .	Elizabeth Tatum

## CHARACTERS

SARA ELIZABETH HANCOCK, *the great-grandmother, ninety-seven*

SUSAN MARY HANCOCK, *the grandmother, sixty-five*

MARTHA SMITH, *the mother, forty-five*

ELIZABETH HANCOCK SMITH, *the girl*

## SCENE

*The living room of the Hancock household in a small western Missouri town.*

## TIME

*About four o'clock in the afternoon in early fall.*

## WOMEN IN THE HOUSE

(When the curtain rises Sarah is lying on the couch at right. An old-fashioned table is placed near the center of the room. At the left is a chaise lounge upholstered in gay cretonne. It is the only gay thing in the dismal room. The couch, in contrast to it, is old fashioned and ugly. At the back of the room over two old fashioned chairs is a cuckoo clock. A door at left leads to the front porch. The door at back leads to hall. The door at right leads to kitchen. Just after curtain rises, Elizabeth comes in front door and bumps into table in the middle of room.)

ELIZABETH. Oh hell!

SARA. Elizabeth Smith, is that you?

ELIZABETH. Well, what do you think?

SARA. I heard you swearing at me, young lady.

ELIZABETH. But, Grandmother, I wasn't swearing at you.

SARA. Don't contradict my word. I hope I've still got enough sense to tell profanity when I hear it. But I'll tell you one thing: no daughter of mine ever swore at me, no grand-daughter ever swore at me, and no great grand-daughter is ever going to swear at me.

ELIZABETH. I'm sorry, Grandmother, I didn't know you were there. I fell over the table and . . .

SARA. That's enough. We won't hear any more about it. Someday, though, you'll be sorry that you weren't nicer to your poor old grandmother, someday when she's dead and gone.

ELIZABETH. Don't talk like that, Grandmother. You're not going to die for a long time yet.

SARA. I'm all right. You're trying to make me feel like I'm old.

ELIZABETH. Don't be silly, Grandmother.

SARA. Child, who do you think you are? Telling me not to be silly. Impertinent young snip. Never home when you should be, but always gadding around. Girls in my day were different. I'll go in and help your mother dish up the vittles. There's not a lazy bone in my body. Ninety-seven, but the good Lord keeps me fit as a fiddle. (*Exits right.*)

ELIZABETH. What a relief!

SUSAN. (*Enters at left*) Hello, pet, did you have a good day at the library?

ELIZABETH. As good as can be. I'm getting so I hate just about everything. The only books in the library are either Zane Grey's or Temple Bailey's. The rest are about live-stock and how to raise rabbits. I hate this town. Little towns are nice when you're a little child, but when you grow up and all your crowd leave except you, then it's hell.

SUSAN. I think it's a pretty little place, pet.

ELIZABETH. It's pretty in the summer, but in the winter it's just gray sky, houses, streets, people, everything. I hate the people, too. They look at me as if they feel sorry for me. I can just see their minds, too. They think "there's that little Smith girl whose father died two years ago. She and her mother haven't much money and they have to live in their

grandmothers' home on the old Hancock place. You know I've heard she just talks terribly to her great-grandmother."

SUSAN. You're just imagining things.

ELIZABETH. Then they wonder about how much money Mother has, and if she intends to marry again, whether we're too poor to send me off to school, or whether I'm just too lazy to go.

SUSAN. I hate to hear you talk like that, pet. Not that I blame you, but I don't believe they think those things. I hope your grandmother doesn't find out that you're smoking, or she'll have another tantrum.

ELIZABETH. She's already had one. I fell over that silly table of hers when I came in, and she heard me say "hell". She says I was swearing at her. Too bad we can't all be infallible like she is. Girls weren't like that in her day. Yes! It's all I've heard for nineteen years.

SUSAN. Don't talk like that about her, pet. She won't be here much longer.

ELIZABETH. If she will be, I won't. Oh, I'm sorry, but I get so damned tired of hearing how things are getting worse and worse. You know, I think she still hates you for marrying Aurelius.

SUSAN. Yes, Aurelius was her favorite son.

ELIZABETH. Well, she ruined your lives together, she ought to be satisfied, but don't ever think she'll ruin every single life she comes in contact with.

SUSAN. I was twenty-nine in January and he died in May. Yes . . . the twenty-sixth . . two days before our anniversary.

ELIZABETH. Oh, how awful, Grannie. Daddy died when Mother was thirty-five. Poor Mother, sometimes I can understand why she acts as she does.

SUSAN. Your mother has had a sad life, too, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. Yes, so have you, but you don't cry constantly about it. You don't suppose if I would ever be married, he'd die young, too, do you, Granny?

SUSAN. Why of course not, honey. You mustn't be superstitious.

ELIZABETH. Well, it looks as though the fates have a particular grudge against us.

SUSAN. You're not in love, are you, pet?

ELIZABETH. I'm afraid so, Granny. (*Puts out her cigarette.*)

SUSAN. Do you want to tell me about him?

ELIZABETH. You've heard about Robert James, the new lawyer in the Post building, haven't you? Well, I love him terribly!

SUSAN. Oh, yes, I've heard about the fascinating young lawyer. Does he . . . love you?

ELIZABETH. Yes, he loves me. We adore the same things from "The Silver Spoon" to black coffee and Chesterfields. Sounds silly, but it means so much, Granny.

SUSAN. I understand, pet. You will marry?

ELIZABETH. That's just it. Granny, do you remember the day Daddy died? I promised him I'd try to make Mother

happy. Well, I've certainly kept it well by staying here, haven't I? I've tried though, Granny, I've tried.

SUSAN. I know, pet; I know.

ELIZABETH. I feel so sorry for her, and I want to be sweet to her and make her happier. Then she starts nagging and crying and feeling sorry for herself. I hate her. I can't be sweet.

SUSAN. Oh, pet, don't talk like that.

ELIZABETH. I know it's awful, but it's the truth. I can't stand to be nagged, and I hate cryey people. You know when I think about her when Daddy was alive and see her now, I can't believe she's the same person. We used to be so happy in the apartment.

SUSAN. I know.

ELIZABETH. I don't guess I should, but I partly blame Sara for the way she acts. She eggs her on. Every time I leave this house, I swear I'll ignore things and not get mad; then I come back and get in this damned atmosphere, and after a little, it's the same things over again. I don't know what to do.

MARTHA. (*Appearing cautiously at right*) Oh, excuse me.

ELIZABETH. That's all right, Mother, come on in.

MARTHA. I'm afraid I might interrupt a private conference. You seem to care so much more for your grandmother than you do for me.

SUSAN. I'm sorry.

ELIZABETH. Mother, is it necessary to be rude?

MARTHA. Do you call it rude when a mother wants to talk to her own daughter for a minute? (*She cries*)

ELIZABETH. Mother, for once, please don't make a scene.

MARTHA. Yes, that's all the comfort I've ever gotten from you. You never turn your hand to help me. All I'm good for is to slave and slave. Then you run to your grandmother with things it's my right to know.

ELIZABETH. Oh, Mother, honey, please don't talk like that.

MARTHA. No, don't come trying to make up to me. Elizabeth, your great-grandmother says you swore at her.

ELIZABETH. I did not. I said "hell" because I stumbled over that damned table of hers. She just keeps it in the middle of the room because she knows it bothers me. I don't see why it has to be there. Other people don't have tables right in the middle of the front rooms.

MARTHA. Well, do we have to be just like other people?

ELIZABETH. Evidently we don't. We're not, anyway. Other people fuss half the time, and we fuss all the time.

MARTHA. Elizabeth, have you been smoking?

ELIZABETH. Well, what if I have?

MARTHA. All right, young lady, I warn you not to smoke in this house. Just wait until your great-grandmother finds out, and see what happens.

ELIZABETH. Oh, I know what will happen all right. But I get so tired of going to the coal-house every time I want to smoke.

MARTHA. I don't like to have you smoke anyway. Other girls don't have to.

(Elizabeth shrugs her shoulders and exits toward the stairs. Sara enters from the kitchen.)

SARA. That pie crust is terrible, Martha, terrible. People don't know how to make pie crusts any more. Now, in my day . . . Martha, what man has been in this house?

MARTHA. (Rather glad to make a scene) None.

SARA. Well, there are cigarettes on the table. HUMPH! Cigarettes! Where is that impudent young snip? She thinks she can deceive me just because I'm ninety-seven. There's few things that go on in this house I don't know about.

MARTHA. That's the truth.

SARA. (Walks to the stairs) Sara Elizabeth Hancock Smith, you come down here. Come down here I say!

ELIZABETH. (Enters) Don't excite yourself, Grandmother. Well, what do you want now?

SARA. Young lady do you smoke?

ELIZABETH. Yes, I do.

SARA. Well, I won't have it. I tell you, I won't have it. None of my children, none of the grandchildren ever smoked. and now none of my great-grandchildren are going to. Only cheap women smoke. Martha, that's the Smith blood cropping out in her. No Hancock woman would do a common thing like that.

ELIZABETH. (Disgustedly) Oh!

SARA. Now young lady, you just hike up to your room and stay there until I tell you you can come down.

ELIZABETH. Grandmother, do you realize that I'm nineteen years old?

SARA. Nineteen or ninety, you'll do as I tell you as long as you're under my roof.

ELIZABETH. I'm sorry, but I refuse to be treated as a child.

SARA. You'll do as I tell you. Stop sassing me and go to your room. Do you realize this is my house?

ELIZABETH. I beg your pardon, but this is Susan's house. Grandfather Aurelius left it to her.

SARA. You hear her, Martha, talking to me like this. Aurelius was my son and he left this house to me.

ELIZABETH. Go look at the will. He left it to Susan.

MARTHA. How dare you talk to your grandmother like that?

SARA. I won't be here much longer. The good Lord will come and take me to my reward. Susan has spoiled her, Martha.

SUSAN. (*Entering from the stairs*) What's the matter, Mother?

SARA. Don't you "Mother" me. You've ruined my son, and now you've made my great grand-daughter a bad woman. Smoking!

ELIZABETH. I don't care if you are ninety-seven years old. You stop talking like that to my grandmother. You ruined

her life with Aurelius, and now you're trying to spoil the rest of it.

SARA. You hear her, Martha? You hear her?

MARTHA. (Crying) Oh, to think I'd come to see the day when my daughter would act like this. If your father could see you now.

(There is a tension in the air. Martha sobs loudly. Sara pounds her crutch on the floor and glares about her. Susan stands terrified trying to quiet things. Elizabeth looks as if she is about to cry. The cuckoo clock strikes six. To Elizabeth this is the final blow. She picks up a magazine and hurls it at the clock.)

ELIZABETH. Stop it. I tell you, stop it. I'm sorry, Grandmother, that I'm repugnant to you. I'm sorry, Mother, that I am not the daughter you wanted me to be. I apologize for living, but for God's sake, stop, stop this fussing.

SARA. Young lady, a curse will fall upon your head for taking the name of the Lord in vain.

ELIZABETH. Oh, Granny, don't let them go on, I can't stand it!

(Martha and Sara both turn on Susan.)

SARA. Do you see what you've done? Spoiling Martha's daughter until she's rotten. Smoking, daring to insult me!

MARTHA. You've taken my daughter away from me. I don't think I can stand any more.

SARA. Martha, stop that sniffling. I am going to take a nap.

SUSAN. We'll drive Elizabeth away, fussing like this.

SARA. Yes, you're the one to talk. Spoiling her until she sasses me. Leave me to sleep.

SUSAN. Just remember what I said, that's all.

(Susan and Martha exit into the kitchen. The stage is quiet for a minute, and then the telephone rings. Sara yells for Martha to come and answer it, but no one comes. The telephone keeps on ringing. At last she gets up and answers it.)

SARA. Who do you want to talk to? Heh . . talk louder, can't you? Mrs. Smith? Well, I don't know whether she can come or not. Hold the wire, I'll call her. Martha . . Martha . . Martha!

(Susan enters.)

SARA. Susan, do you know where Martha is?

SUSAN. She's in the kitchen.

SARA. She must be deaf. I've been yelling for her. I may be ninety-seven, but I can hear better than that. Where are you going?

SUSAN. I'm going to run across to Mrs. Cannon's. She's ill.

SARA. Martha! Martha! I can't seem to raise her. Here, stop . . don't hang up. Here she is.

MARTHA. Who is it?

SARA. Well, how would I know?

MARTHA. Hello . . hello. No, no, this is Mrs. Smith. I'll call Elizabeth. It was for Elizabeth, not for me. Elizabeth, Elizabeth, you're wanted on the 'phone.

SARA. All that trouble of calling you for nothing.

MARTHA. It's a man. I wonder who it is.

(Elizabeth enters from the stairs. Her eyes are red.)

ELIZABETH. Hello. Oh! How are you?

MARTHA. Who is it?

(Susan enters from left.)

SARA. I thought you'd gone to see Mrs. Cannon.

SUSAN. She's worse and they won't let anyone see her.

SARA. I knew that Mrs. Cannon would kill herself, gadding about in those thin clothes like she does, . . . showing off her legs.

ELIZABETH. Just a minute, please. Grandmother, please be quiet. I can't hear a word.

SARA. Since when can't I talk in my own house? I'll talk whenever I please, and no one will stop me. Who's that she's talking to that's so much a person can't even whisper?

ELIZABETH. No, I had a headache so I couldn't meet you. I told your office boy to tell you I couldn't.

SARA. (Moving up nearer to Elizabeth) Who's this you're meeting? Who's this she's talking to?

MARTHA. I don't know. She never tells me anything. I'm just her mother. Susan probably knows, though.

ELIZABETH. Yes, wait a minute. Mother, please be quiet. I'm trying to talk over the telephone.

SARA. I'd never let a daughter of mine put anything over on me. Martha, if I were you, I'd make her tell me who it was.

SUSAN. Be quiet and let the poor child talk.

MARTHA. I told you she knew who it was. Elizabeth never tells me anything, but I can work my fingers to the bone for her, slave and slave. What does she care?

ELIZABETH. You know that's impossible. I can't. . . . You're sure that you. . . Oh, you know I do.

SARA. Children today are like that. They never respect their father and mother. When I was young I respected my parents.

ELIZABETH. What did you say? I can't seem to hear, there's so much noise.

SARA. If I were you, Martha, I'd show her I was her mother.

(*The cuckoo clock strikes fifteen after six.*)

ELIZABETH. Wait a minute, the clock is striking. Seems like nothing human could stop it.

SUSAN. Come on, let's go in to dinner.

SARA. You see, trying to get rid of us. We'll just stay right here.

ELIZABETH. I don't know what to do . . . everything is so horrible around here. Yes. . . .yes. That is one way of looking at it.

SARA. Looking at what?

ELIZABETH. All right, dear, I'll know by then. You know I do. Goodbye. . and if I don't, you'll know that I'll. . yes. . always.

SARA. Well?

ELIZABETH. Well, what?

SARA. I'll stand no impertinence, young lady. Who were you talking to?

ELIZABETH. Isn't that my own business?

SARA. You're too young to have any business with a man.

ELIZABETH. And you. . married at sixteen!

SARA. I had more sense when I was sixteen than you will have when you're fifty. Well, who was he?

ELIZABETH. I think I should be allowed a little privacy. I'm not going to tell you.

SARA. I won't stand any impertinence. You'll either tell or go to bed without your supper.

ELIZABETH. You still think I'm five, don't you?

SARA. You were better behaved when you were five. If I were your mother, I'd take a switch to your hide and tan you good.

ELIZABETH. I don't doubt it.

MARTHA. Whom were you talking to, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH. Mother, I'm sick of having to tell everything I do, say, or think!

**MARTHA.** I'm your mother. I've a right to know who you were talking to.

**ELIZABETH.** (*Exits hurriedly up the steps*) Please don't nag, Mother.

**SARA.** Let her be, Martha. She just wants to be contrary. Let her alone and let's go to dinner. I expect the vittles are cold already.

**MARTHA.** Coming, Susan?

**SUSAN.** I want to darn this stocking for Elizabeth first.

**SARA.** Well, if you haven't got sense enough to eat.

(*Elizabeth comes down the stairs*)

**SUSAN.** So you're going?

**ELIZABETH.** Yes, wouldn't you? I've been thinking things out. I don't think Daddy would want me to stay if he could see how things are. That last little scene about the telephone was too much. Maybe if I left Sara would calm down. Just the sight of me seems to antagonize her.

**SUSAN.** I think you are right.

**ELIZABETH.** I hope I'm not disappointing Daddy.

**SUSAN.** I think he would be proud of his daughter.

**ELIZABETH.** We're going to Havana for our honeymoon, and when we come back we're going to have an apartment . . lots of peace and quiet . . and happiness. You'll have to come and see us a lot. You will, won't you?

**SUSAN.** It is sweet of you to . .

ELIZABETH. The only thing I hate is that I have to leave you with them.

SUSAN. Don't you worry about me, pet. I'll be all right. Sara can't live forever and Martha and I'll get along fine.

ELIZABETH. I love you so much, Granny.

SUSAN. I hate to have you go, pet, but it's best.

ELIZABETH. Robert is so sweet, Granny. He's got the bluest eyes. I love him . . . love him. Oh, Granny, I'm really going to be happy.

(They both look at the clock.)

ELIZABETH. He ought to be here. You don't suppose he's not coming do you, Granny?

SUSAN. No, pet. The clock's five minutes fast. . . . I hear a car.

ELIZABETH. There he is, Granny. I wish I could have him in so you could see him, but I'd better not. I know you'll love him too.

SUSAN. God bless you. . . and be happy, my dear.

(They walk to the door. Elizabeth kisses Susan.)

SUSAN. Did I ever tell you, honey . . . Aurelius had blue eyes, too.

ELIZABETH. I'm glad. (She goes out.)

SUSAN. She's gone; it'll be lonely. Yes, it'll be lonely.

(The fussy voices are heard from the kitchen.)

CURTAIN



# **ALSACE IN MISSOURI**

**By**

**ALLEAN LEMMON  
EVELYN MILLIGAN  
BETTY YOUNG**

**RUTHANEZ FELKER  
BLAND KIRK  
VIRGINIA WILBUR**



## ALSACE IN MISSOURI

*Alsace in Missouri* was awarded honorable mention in the 1933 Dramatic Arts Contest and was produced at Christian College, April 1934, with the Dramatic Arts Club as guests. It was written in much the same way that *Dust* was written, but it had six playwrights instead of four. When it was produced, it was directed by Miss Louise Freeland, head of the dramatics department at Christian College, with the following cast:

RALPH . . . . .	Betty Haas
CYNTHIA . . . . .	Joan McKowen
GRANDMA HODGES	Pauline Chesnutt
MRS. COLLINS . . . . .	Kathryn Maddox
MISS LAKE . . . . .	Virginia Horr
MRS. FLEMMING . . . . .	Allene George

## CHARACTERS

**GRANDMA HODGES**, *seventy-five years old*

**RALPH**      }  
**CYNTHIA**      } *her ten-year-old twin grandchildren*

**MRS. COLLINS**, *a neighbor*

**MISS LAKE**, *the teacher, with her first school*

**MRS. FLEMMING**, *the county superintendent*

## SCENE

*Grandma's kitchen in the river bottoms of the Island, off Atchison County, Missouri. This is a small frame house of people who are not poverty-stricken and yet who are not used to much.*

## TIME

*About four-thirty, an October afternoon.*

## ALSACE IN MISSOURI

(As the curtain rises Ralph and Cynthia are playing Ralph's favorite game.)

CYNTHIA. But I don't want to be hung again today, Ralph. It's your turn.

RALPH. You have to be hung because you're Grandpa, and I'm bushwhackers.

CYNTHIA. But why can't I be bushwhackers?

RALPH. 'Cause bushwhackers are always men.

CYNTHIA. So was Grandpa a man.

RALPH. Oh, go on. Play like I'm a bushwhacker and I call you out of your house. Come on, now you say: "What you coming around here this time of night for?"

CYNTHIA. I know. (In a deep voice) What do you mean calling 'spectable people out of their beds this time of night?

RALPH. (Imitating a villain) Come on out here and I'll tell you.

CYNTHIA. (Arranging chairs to form a door and coming between them) State your business, suh.

RALPH. I'm going to hang you.

CYNTHIA. You forgot about quartering me.

RALPH. I have to hang you first, don't I? Where's the rope? There 'tis. Now let me put it round your neck. (She yells) Shut up. Grandpa didn't act like that. He was too proud to holler.

CYNTHIA. Aw, quit pulling so tight. That hurts.

RALPH. Well, I guess it didn't hurt Grandpa. Now go on and die so I can quarter you. Don't you run off till I get the knife.

CYNTHIA. How am I going to run off if I'm dead? Don't you cut me!

RALPH. What do you think I've got this knife for, you damn Yankee. (*Flourishes knife.*)

GRANDMA. (*Entering with water-bucket which she puts on shelf before window.*) What's all this rumpus? What you young 'uns up to? Ralph, put down that knife, 'fore you go cutting yourself four ways for Sunday. (*Takes knife away from him.*) It's a pity a body can't step out for a minute but you're up to your tricks. Cynthia, what are you screeching for?

RALPH. (*Hurriedly*) Cyn and I were just playing.

GRANDMA. (*Taking off bonnet*) What were you playing? It won't do you airy bit of good to try to lie out of it.

RALPH. (*Sitting down in chair at right of table*) Aw gee, Grandma, we were just playing bushwhackers—Cyn was your pappy—

CYNTHIA. And he was going to quarter me.

GRANDMA. You young 'uns is the orniest lot I ever saw. (*Crosses to table with potato pan. Takes potatoes from sack and stands there looking them over.*) If you'd been there like I was and seen what I seen, you wouldn't be making no game out of it.

CYNTHIA. What did it look like, Grandma? I've forgot.

GRANDMA. I've told you nigh on to a million times.

RALPH. Oh, go on and tell us again.

GRANDMA. I'm 'fraid it'll give you both nightmares.

RALPH. We like to have nightmares.

CYNTHIA. Please tell us 'bout it, Grandma.

GRANDMA. Well, maybe it'll teach you a few things.  
(Starts peeling potatoes. Cynthia sits in chair on left of table.)  
It was when I was five years old. I never will forget that night; cooler than ordinary in Kansas, and so still you could hear a mile. I must of been plumb asleep because the first I remember was that awful banging at the door and somebody shouting for us to pack ourselves out of there.

CYNTHIA. It was the bushwhackers!

GRANDMA. Yes, it was the bushwhackers! They snuck over from Missouri, the dirty skunks, hell-bent for murder. That's all Missouri's fit for—to raise bushwhackers. I vowed right then I'd never set foot in the state if I could help it. And even if I did have to change my mind about that, I won't be beholden to it for nothing! (She stops belligerently.)

RALPH. What happened after you heard the knocking?

GRANDMA. Pappy was the first to go out. They shot him where he stood, when he'd no more'n said two words.

CYNTHIA. What did you do?

GRANDMA. I was inside with Ma. Both of us was yelling and trying to hide our eyes, but them guerillas fetched us out

and made us watch while they took a knife and cut Pap clean in two. Then Ma fainted and they drug her away to where their horses was hitched. I didn't never clap eyes on her again.

RALPH. When was it they set the house on fire?

GRANDMA. Right then. They fired it and stood around till it was nigh burned; then they got on their horses and rode away just as quick and sneaking as they come. I declare I don't know how I come to escape, but they just pushed me over in a clump of bushes and left me there yelling. The neighbors found me next morning and took me in with them. (*Resuming her brisk tone.*) Now you see why I don't want to ketch you playing that game again. I been trying to forget it for seventy years and I don't want you young 'uns reminding me of it.

RALPH. But it's the best game we got, Grandma.

CYNTHIA. Yes, I get tired playing that ol' cowboy 'n Indians.

GRANDMA. (*Disgustedly*) You ain't got a heart between you. I'm surprised I don't come in and find you acting out your ma and pa getting drowned in the river. It wouldn't matter to you that they wasn't more'n cold in their graves.

CYNTHIA. I wish Mamma was here. Grandma, won't I ever see her again?

GRANDMA. That's not for me to be a knowin', Cynthia. As I always say, the good Lord'll protect His own. Now, you run along and find something else to do.

RALPH. There ain't nothing else to do.

CYNTHIA. There ain't ever anything to do since you made us stop school.

RALPH. Why won't you let us go to school, Grandma? All the other kids on the Island get to.

GRANDMA. You're not goin', and that's all there is to it. In my day and time young 'uns dastn't sass back. (*Crosses to shelf under window and gets slop bucket.*) If they did, they got walloped. (*Coaxingly*) Maybe you children will help Grandma and peel potatoes while Grandma slops the pig.

RALPH. Oh, let me slop the pig, Grandma.

CYNTHIA. I'm not going to stay here by myself.

GRANDMA. Ralph, when you get big enough to tote the bucket you can mind the pig all the time. But you stay and help Cynthy now. She can't peel all those 'tatoes alone. I'll be back in three shakes of a dead lamb's tail if I have to shake it myself. (*Puts on sunbonnet.*)

RALPH. You can't get back in three shakes from way down in the south pasture.

GRANDMA. I'll be back 'fore you get those 'tatoes ready. Mind you don't get the floor soppin' wet. (*Exit.*)

RALPH. We don't get the floor soppin' wet, do we, Cyn?

CYNTHIA. I don't know. You spilled an awful lot of water last night when you leaned on the dishpan.

RALPH. We'll put it here on the floor. Then we can't spill it. (*They place the pan on the floor, then sit down and start to peel potatoes.*) Grandma sure can get rambunctious.

CYNTHIA. (*Imitating an adult.*) She means well.

RALPH. She gets more rambunctious about us wantin' to go to school than anything else. I don't see why she won't let us.

CYNTHIA. If Miss Lake was a mean old thing like Miss Hawkins, I'd be glad to stay away. Ralph, I think maybe it's because of our clothes. Even the Sunday go to meetin' ones are patched.

RALPH. Aw, who cares about clothes? Grandma wouldn't be stoopin' to no clothes-worrying. Say, Cyn, do you s'pose she's scairt?

CYNTHIA. Scairt of what?

RALPH. Of bein' here alone by herself, without anyone around.

CYNTHIA. Grandma ain't a scairty-cat.

RALPH. No, and I s'pose you ain't either. Wasn't you scairt a while ago when I was hangin' you?

CYNTHIA. Nope.

RALPH. Then why'd you holler for? Tell me that, scairdy. Why'd you have to holler?

CYNTHIA. Just 'cause.

RALPH. That's always what you say—just 'cause. (*Imitating her.*)

CYNTHIA. (Starts to throw a potato at him but makes a face instead.) Pig, you're getting the peelings as big as the potatoes. Grandma's awful persnickity about her peelings.

RALPH. I don't see why we have to be so careful. She

gives 'em to that old hog anyway. She thinks about as much of him as she does of us.

MRS. COLLINS. (*Outside*) Yoo-hoo, it's Mrs. Collins.

RALPH. (*Scrambling up and putting pan on table*) That old thing, she always kisses us.

CYNTHIA. (*Crosses to door*) You better be nice to her, 'cause Miss Lake stays at her house. (*Opens door*) Oh, Miss Lake's with her!

(*Miss Lake enters, followed by Mrs. Collins.*)

MISS LAKE. May we come in?

(*Cynthia runs to her and hugs her.*)

MRS. COLLINS. Come kiss me twinnies. (*Cynthia goes reluctantly but plainly finds her affection distasteful. Ralph gets out of the way.*) You know, children always take to me.

MISS LAKE. Is Grandma at home?

RALPH. She's down on the south pasture feedin' her pig.

CYNTHIA. (*Shyly*) I been wanting to see you so bad, Miss Lake. I thought maybe you wouldn't come here any more.

MRS. COLLINS. Poor little things. They don't have much company since their ma and pa passed on to a better land. Ralph, you go tell your grandma she's got visitors. Miss Lake had to run over a spell, and I thought I'd just come along.

RALPH. Cyn's got to go if I do.

CYNTHIA. Can't I stay with you, Miss Lake?

MISS LAKE. You go on with Ralph, Cynthia. I'll wait here for you.

CYNTHIA. All right, we'll run. (*Exit.*)

MISS LAKE. They're sweet kids.

MRS. COLLINS. Poor orphan lambs. (*Takes off bonnet and makes herself quite at home*) And since that old woman got here, they're worse off than ever. Not that she's mean, I'd say just unsociable like. She's a queer sort, not the kind I'd exactly take to every time; but then you can't be too choosy and still be neighborly.

MISS LAKE. I just can't see why she won't send them to school. (*Sits at table at right.*)

MRS. COLLINS. Maybe it was because of last year. Not to be a-talkin', but last spring Miss Hawkins let the children get lice in their heads, and some of them mighty nigh ruint their hair with coal oil tryin' to kill 'em. 'Course, I wouldn't say anything against Miss Hawkins, but if you ask my opinion, it was on account of that the school board let her go. I was so afraid she'd bring the varmints into my nice clean house. There's always something unhandy about boarding teachers. Not to be insinuating nothin' about you, Miss Lake.

MISS LAKE. I'll do my best not to bring any lice home from school with me, Mrs. Collins.

MRS. COLLINS. (*Draws hand over shelves and looks at dust on fingers*) Well, it just goes to show that all folks ain't so particular about some things as they might be. (*Turning up the rug*) Humph, just as I thought; probably dust from last week that she's swept under it.

**MISS LAKE.** You know, Grandma doesn't strike me as being dirty at all. Maybe a little careless.

**MRS. COLLINS.** Careless is a mighty easy way of puttin' it.

**MISS LAKE.** That's just what Grandma is. Easy going under her bold front. I've only been over here two or three times, but she's always seemed quite lovable to me.

**MRS. COLLINS.** I just can't understand her. That's what it is, Miss Lake. You'd think a body like me could get next to her, but in all this time I haven't been able to get down to scratch.

**MISS LAKE.** (*Laughing*) She must be queer if you can't get next to her, Mrs. Collins.

**MRS. COLLINS.** (*Missing the point*) Goodness knows I've tried, but— (*Her attention is attracted by something outside the window*) Who's that stopping? (*Hurries to window*) Well, who do you suppose it is? I've never seen a car like that in this neighborhood. It's got a Nebraska license, though, and from this county.

**MISS LAKE.** We don't often see any kind of cars down this road.

**MRS. COLLINS.** Kind of nice lookin' woman gettin' out. See if you know her.

**MISS LAKE.** (*Going to window*) Why that's Mrs. Flemming, the county superintendent.

**MRS. COLLINS.** Land, what's she comin' for?

**MISS LAKE.** I'll let her in. (*Starts to stage left*) Oh—is the front door still locked?

MRS. COLLINS. Yes, Grandma's nailed it, too. It's a pity with a visitor like her comin'. I'll show her in. (*Starts toward door, hastily arranging apron and skirt.*)

MISS LAKE. Maybe you'd better let me. I know her.

MRS. COLLINS. Oh, that's all right. (*Precedes her to door*) Come right on in the back way, Mrs. Flemming. The front door's nailed down. Anyhow, it makes it right sociable and neighborly comin' in like this.

MISS LAKE. (*Stepping forward*) How do you do, Mrs. Flemming.

MRS. FLEMMING. How are you, Miss Lake? You folks certainly do live at the end of the earth. I started early so I'd get here before school let out, and then I didn't make it on time.

MRS. COLLINS. (*She has seated herself*) Did you have car trouble?

MISS LAKE. Oh, Mrs. Flemming, this is Mrs. Collins. I board with her.

MRS. COLLINS. (*Rises hastily, rubs hand on apron, then extends it smirking.*) Pleased to meet you.

MRS. FLEMMING. Oh, yes, Mrs. Collins, Mrs. Hawkins told me all about you, but you weren't at home when I was here last year.

MRS. COLLINS. Yes, I always board the teachers. It's such a comfort. (*Sits down again.*)

MISS LAKE. Won't you sit down, Mrs. Flemming? (*Seats her*) I'm sorry we missed each other.

MRS. FLEMMING. Well, I went over to the school first and when I saw it was out, I just asked around till I found out where you were. I knew I'd have to see you if you were anywhere near, because this is one trip I can't make again soon.

MISS LAKE. I'll bet you've had a terribly hard trip.

MRS. FLEMMING. Not so hard; just tiresome. It's inconvenient having just one district to visit on the Missouri side of the river. I got to figuring up as I was driving. It's twenty-five miles further to this island than to any other school district in the county, and you have to go through three counties to get here. It's perfectly absurd that Missouri doesn't take over this piece of land.

MISS LAKE. I've always wondered about that.

MRS. FLEMMING. Oh, this island used to be attached to the Nebraska shore. It's moved away in the last fifteen years.

MISS LAKE. Well, I didn't know that!

MRS. COLLINS. I can tell you, Mrs. Flemming, that everybody hereabouts would rather go twenty miles to Rock Port, Missouri, to pay their taxes than to traipse sixty miles to Auburn, Nebraska. It's outlandish to be livin' in one state when you ought to be livin' in another, just because the Missouri River goes galavanting around. Here we were onct, nearer than that (*She measures the distance with a thumb and forefinger*) to the Nebraska shore; then the old river began pushin' and tuggin' and heavin' around and here first thing we knowed we were jammed right up against the Missouri shore line.

MRS. FLEMMING. There's a place in France the same way. They call it Alsace, and the people can hardly tell whether they're living in France or Germany. Up until the last war they were German subjects when they wanted to be French. You might call this place Alsace in Missouri.

MRS. COLLINS. (Cackles) I'll have to remember that one! (Cackles again) Alsace in Missouri! (She keeps murmuring "Alsace in Missouri" and breaking into fits of laughter all through the next speech.)

MRS. FLEMMING. You wrote me you were having a little trouble, Miss Lake. Maybe we'd better go to your room and talk. I'd like to get started home as soon as I can before dark.

MISS LAKE. No, I'd rather you'd stay here and talk to Mrs. Hodges for me. She's the one I wrote you about, you know.

MRS. FLEMMING. Where is she?

MRS. COLLINS. We've sent for her, but she ain't so spry as she once was.

MRS. FLEMMING. You wrote me, didn't you, that she wouldn't let her grandchildren go to school?

MISS LAKE. Yes, and no one seems to know just why. I've tried talking to her, but I can't do a thing; I thought maybe if you would come down you could find out what the trouble is.

MRS. COLLINS. She doesn't take much to teachers, nohow, Miss Lake. I heard her say she wouldn't give a snap for the whole lot of them, but she really is a good old soul.

MRS. FLEMMING. Has she got something against this particular school or is she just opposed to education?

MISS LAKE. No, that's the queer thing about it. I really think she wants the children to have the best advantages possible. And you don't feel that she's just unreasonable or bad-natured. There's something sort of—shy about her. She almost reminds me of Cynthia.

MRS. COLLINS. Cynthia is the little girl, Mrs. Flemming.

MRS. FLEMMING. Is Mrs. Hodges particularly feeble, then? Does she need somebody to stay with her?

MRS. COLLINS. Not so as you can notice it. When she's got her legs under her, you can see her stridin' around the place like a young pullet. If you want to know what I think, Mrs. Flemming, I think she believes that what's good enough for her is good enough for her grandchildren.

MISS LAKE. Oh, I believe she's got more common sense than that.

CYNTHIA. (*Outside*) Hurry up, Grandma, there's another lady here.

MRS. FLEMMING. Maybe I can find out something from the children.

(*The twins burst in.*)

MISS LAKE. Mrs. Flemming, this is Ralph and Cynthia.

CYNTHIA. How 'do. (*Ralph backs up embarrassedly.*)

MRS. FLEMMING. So these are the twins. What's this I hear about your not going to school, children?

RALPH. Grandma won't let us.

CYNTHIA. We want to go to school.

MRS. FLEMMING. Why won't she let you?

CYNTHIA. (*Crossing to left of stage, bashfully*) She won't tell us why.

RALPH. And when we keep asking her, she says not to sass back, doesn't she, Cyn? (*Follows his sister.*)

MRS. COLLINS. Shhhhhh, you folks! Here she is. (*Grandma enters.*) You got lots of company, Grandma Hodges.

MISS LAKE. Good afternoon, Mrs. Hodges.

MRS. FLEMMING. How do you do.

GRANDMA. How do, folks. I see you've already made yourselves to home.

MRS. COLLINS. Where you been?

GRANDMA. I been minding my own business, and it would be a good thing if other folks would do the same.

MISS LAKE. Mrs. Hodges, this is the county superintendent Mrs. Flemming. She wants to talk to you.

GRANDMA. As long as you're here, you might as well out with it. Just keep your seats. (*She sits at right of table.*)

MRS. FLEMMING. I guess you know why I've come—to see about the children not being in school.

GRANDMA. (*Tensely*) Yes?

MRS. FLEMMING. They're ten years old, aren't they?

GRANDMA. Ten goin' on eleven.

MRS. FLEMMING. Well, you probably know then that they come under the compulsory school attendance law. That means they have to be in school unless there's some very important reason for keeping them out.

GRANDMA. I got my reasons.

MRS. FLEMMING. That's just what I came to find out, Mrs. Hodges.

GRANDMA. Well, for one thing, I'm an old woman and I need them by me.

MRS. FLEMMING. Now you know you're not feeble, Mrs. Hodges. You'll have to give a better reason than that. The thing of it is, this commonwealth says that every child must be educated until he's fourteen years old, and you're taking it upon yourself to break a law.

GRANDMA. I can teach them reading and writing and Scriptures, and until it suits better to send them to school I guess I'll let good enough be.

MRS. FLEMMING. It's not up to you to settle it, Mrs. Hodges. The law requires qualified teachers.

GRANDMA. I know what's good for my own grandchildren. I've lived seventy-five years, and I guess I ought to know something.

MRS. FLEMMING. It's not a question of what you know or don't know. It's a question of having a teacher's certificate.

GRANDMA. Fiddlesticks! A certificate ain't worth the paper it's writ on unless good common sense goes with it.

MRS. FLEMMING. Mrs. Hodges, I want you to tell me the real reason you won't send these children to school. Is there anything wrong with the school?

GRANDMA. I guess the school's all right, as far as that goes.

MRS. FLEMMING. Then what is it?

GRANDMA. (*Flaring up.*) I knowed there'd be nothing but trouble in this state. I vowed I'd never set foot here, but a body will do a lot for her grandchildren. What else could I do but pick up and come when their pappy left this here place for them to take care of? There wasn't nothin' I could do, was there?

MRS. FLEMMING. I declare, I don't know just what you're talking about, Mrs. Hodges, but if you're interested in your grandchildren as you say you are, I should think you'd want them to learn something.

GRANDMA. Who's to be tellin' me what I want for my own blood and kin?

MRS. FLEMMING. Mrs. Hodges, I'm sorry you won't be reasonable. I can't waste any more time here. If those children aren't back in school by tomorrow, I'll see that the sheriff comes over and brings them before the court.

GRANDMA. No sheriff in the state of Missouri is going to touch my grandchildren.

MRS. FLEMMING. Missouri?

MRS. COLLINS. Well, I swan!

GRANDMA. What's the matter? You don't mean to tell me—?

MRS. FLEMMING. You surely know this school district is in Nebraska.

GRANDMA. Nebraska?

RALPH. Didn't you know that?

MRS. FLEMMING. Nemaha County, Nebraska.

GRANDMA. Then this here whole island is in Nebraska?

MRS. FLEMMING. It certainly is.

MISS LAKE. Yes; if a man wants to get married, he has to go clear to Auburn, Nebraska, for a license.

MRS. COLLINS. Oh, you're thinkin' about gettin' married (*As Miss Lake pays no attention to her, she turns to Grandma*) Grandma, if you'd been more sociable like since you come, you'd of known you were living in Nebraska. Don't I send my taxes to Auburn every year? I'll say I do.

GRANDMA. Well, I'll be!

MISS LAKE. Does that make everything all right, Grandma? You'll send the children to school now?

GRANDMA. Land, yes!

MISS LAKE. Oh, I'm so glad. (*Holds out her arms to Cynthia who comes running up.*)

RALPH. You bet we'll be the first ones there in the morning.

CYNTHIA. Grandma, can I wear my pink dress? (*Grandma, to hide her embarrassment, extracts a peppermint from her apron pocket and begins chewing furiously.*)

MRS. FLEMMING. Well, that's fine. (*Gets up*) Now that

everything's all right, I'd better get started back. (*Hesitates*) I would like to ask you, Mrs. Hodges, what you have against Missouri?

GRANDMA. (*Flustered*) We'd best let bygones be bygones.

CYNTHIA. I know why. It's because the bushwhackers came from Missouri.

RALPH. See, they was the ones that killed her mammy and pap. They cut him in pieces.

MISS LAKE. Horrible!

MRS. FLEMMING. Is that true?

GRANDMA. Yes, it was when I was a young 'un in Kansas.

MRS. FLEMMING. I can see more how you feel, now. Would you let me stop in and talk to you longer the next time I'm here?

GRANDMA. You'd be more'n welcome, Mrs. Flemming. 'Most any time; I'm 'most always to home.

MISS LAKE. (*Preparing to leave with Mrs. Flemming*) Then I'll see you two in the morning.

MRS. COLLINS. (*Also leaving*) I hope they don't bring you home any lice from the school, Grandma.

GRANDMA. Well, if they do, they'll be Nebraska lice.

CURTAIN

# THE FRONT DOOR

By

**BARBARA BUSSE**



## BARBARA BUSSE

Barbara Busse's play *The Front Door* was awarded the gold trophy cup in the 1934 Midwest Folk Playwriting Contest, a contest in which college students from nine states competed, and the same play was awarded honorable mention in the 1934 Dramatic Arts Contest and first Phi Theta Kappa prize.

Her interest is primarily in journalism. She was editor of the Christian College Microphone, and her editorial and feature story were awarded honorable mention in the 1934 Missouri Inter-scholastic Press Association Contest.

*The Front Door*, the only play in this collection that has not yet been produced, will be staged during the coming year at Christian College and at the Missouri Workshop.

## CHARACTERS

MINNIE TOBIAS, *a spinster neighbor*

EMMA JONES, *another neighbor*

HENRY LEWIS, *widower of the woman whose  
body lies in a near-by room*

MOLLY LEWIS, *their daughter*

FRANK BAXTER, *the undertaker*

## SCENE

*Kitchen in farmhouse, near Holdenville, Iowa, a land flowing  
with milk and honey, a land of corn and good sturdy farm  
stock, a land of the people.*

## TIME

*About noon on a summer day.*

## THE FRONT DOOR

(The curtain rises on the kitchen of a large farmhouse. There is the bulky, dingy, complacent black range, the battered milk cans, standing sentinel-like under the big, linoleum-covered kitchen table, and a huge, white cupboard.

The room is large and inconveniently arranged, and modern improvements of any kind are conspicuous by their absence. There is no running water, no electric lights. The only sign of the present century in the whole room is a telephone, the long-necked wall variety. There are two doors to the room, one leading into the dining room and front part of the house in the back wall, left, and the other opening on the back porch, down stage, right.

In spite of the inconvenience and the lack of modern improvements in the kitchen, there is a dignity to the room—a dignity of clean, shiny floor, of snowy curtains at the window, of a bright red geranium blooming in an equally bright red pot on the window sill, and of faded, spotlessly clean rag rugs on the floor. The room is sunny and cheerful, well-lived in.

At the present time the table and cupboard are crowded with jars, baskets, and paper sacks of food. The shiny, fudge-brown, chocolate cake, a jar of peach pickles, a plate of ice-box cookies are all there. It is the scene evidently of either a wedding or a funeral. At no other time do "the neighbors" provide quite so much nourishment.

At the sink, peeling brilliantly red tomatoes, is Emma Jones. The manner in which she vigorously and efficiently attacks the pile of tomatoes beside her reveals the quality of her energetic soul. She is a large-bosomed, wide-hipped woman in a crisp

wash-dress, almost completely covered with a starched white apron, which crackles as she moves. Her bouncing jet earrings bob up and down merrily as she talks, reflecting the shine of her black, twinkling eyes, creased into oblong slits by her fat cheeks.

At the kitchen cabinet, Minnie Tobias is cutting bread for sandwiches. She is a spinster now in her fiftieth year, a fact which she bravely but rather futilely tries to live down. She is the closest neighbor of the Lewises. Her voice is a mournful whine, ready to match a mournful and reedy nature. She prides herself on being a good neighbor, a good citizen, and a good woman. In appearance she is thin with the pathetic thinness of a life of single-blessedness. Her gray eyes are mournful. She has, however, by some means, retained from girlhood a delicate, patrician air, perhaps because of her narrow, high-bridged nose, on which is perched firmly a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, and because of her narrow, thin, transparent-looking hands, and her high-arched, oxford-shod feet.)

EMMA. (Briskly dipping tomato she is peeling into pan of water and shaking it) Land sakes! A body can't even have running water around here.

MINNIE. (Dolefully) Poor Laura! How she stood it all these years I don't see!

EMMA. (Shortly) Well, I can say one thing. I wouldn't be here now if it weren't that I wanted to do something for her. I never seemed to get around to it when she was—here.

MINNIE. (Wiping eyes self-consciously) We were neighbors for a good many years, and there wasn't a day she wasn't over with a piece of cake—or some ice-box cookies—or a

piece of apple pie. My! But she could make good pie—a crust that just melted in your mouth.

EMMA. There wasn't anything she could do for other people that was too much for her. (*Softly*) She saved my Jimmy's life when the doctors said he wouldn't live until morning.

MINNIE. I remember . . .

EMMA. He was awful sick, and all I could do was cry and beg them to do something—anything so he'd get well. They said there wasn't anything to do.

MINNIE. (*Sagely*) All doctors are alike. They don't care.

EMMA. Then Laura just stepped in and worked all night on him, and by morning he was peaceful as anything. The fever was broken; now he's as strong and husky as any of them.

MINNIE. (*Choking*) And she . . . she's lying in there . . .

EMMA. (*Softly*) I know her soul's in heaven. She was an angel right here on earth.

(*There is a silence. Finally Minnie breaks it more matter-of-factly.*)

MINNIE. Don't she look pretty though, lying there with all those flowers? Usually people that die of typhoid look awful. My cousin Lefty's wife died of . . .

EMMA. (*Stopping her cutting and turning around to face Minnie while she talks. She emphasizes her remarks with the paring knife*) I always claimed, as perhaps I shouldn't now that she's dead, that it was her own fault Henry didn't

treat her right. She spoiled him something awful, waiting on him and slaving for him.

MINNIE. Goodness knows Henry could have afforded plenty of help. I think it was plain wicked of him to let her kill herself on this big ranch of a farm all these years.

EMMA. (Goes to cupboard to get plate on which to slice tomatoes. Examines jar of peach pickles on way) My! These are nice peach pickles Mary sent over. I wonder how she keeps them so firm.

MINNIE. She sent those nice strawberry preserves too. (Sighing) All I'm going to let myself say is that I don't see how Laura stood. . that man . . for twenty-five years. Seems to me the least he could have done was finish the front door.

EMMA. Or put in plumbing. I guess if he'd had to carry in the water from the pump that many years he'd have had running water inside here long ago.

MINNIE. (With a wisdom of marriage that is always the attribute of the unmarried) I still think she should have trained him different. There's no getting around it. She should have got him into the habit of doing things for her from the very day they was married.

EMMA. You can just bet all the eggs your best Buff Orpington laid this last week that I've got him humping for me this morning if the funeral is to be tomorrow afternoon. He's out getting some water for me right now.

MINNIE. I will say for him he seems to feel real bad about Laura. He'll miss her. (Sighing and wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron.) Poor, dear Laura! I guess it's his fault

that her life wasn't the happiest in the world. I'm not one to talk, but I've been her nearest neighbor for the past twen—for all these years, and believe me, I could tell you a thing or two that most people don't know if I'd a mind to. Our farms aren't so far apart that you can't help seeing. . things.

EMMA. (*Returning to sink and beginning to slice tomatoes on plate*) My! My! Of course I've heard just what everyone else knows. I didn't . . .

MINNIE. (*Kneading butter to make it spread easier*) Well, I don't suppose Henry Lewis is exactly a bad man, but he's certainly the unkindest one I've ever met. If he ever spoke an extra word, to say nothing of a kind one, to Laura from morning to night I never heard it. I must say. . .

(*Steps can be heard on the back porch.*)

EMMA. Shh! Here he comes!

(*There is a painful silence as Henry Lewis walks lumberingly into the room, carrying a pail of water which he places on a small table beside the sink. Both women are a little fussed and red. Henry is a man of the soil, earthy, a mountain of a man with the brooding silence of a mountain. His big, work-squared shoulders are bowed with the articulate pain of a silent man, who, when mortally wounded, can make no outcry.*)

HENRY. Here's your water, Emma. (*Dumbly his brown eyes, glazed with pain like those of an injured dog that can make no noise but silently suffers, fasten themselves on the floor at his feet as he sits slowly in a chair by the table. He is dressed in his best clothes, and his strong hands, wide and built for hard work, are pathetically crossed in his lap in their enforced idleness.*)

EMMA. (*Who recovers first*) Thank you, Henry. Jane Freeman came over with this chocolate cake while you were outside. She says her ma is right broken up over poor Laura's . . . passing away.

(*Henry remains unphappily silent, his face set in lines of pain.*)

MINNIE. And Mrs. Bascomb phoned—said she was going to come over this afternoon to help.

EMMA. Not that there's anything much she can do, but I suppose she thought it would look more neighborly like.

MINNIE. (*Washing hands at sink*) My! Ain't it hot! I think I'll make some lemonade, and then you and Molly can eat. (*Phone on wall rings, making them all jump with its unexpected clamor*) I'll go. (*At phone*) Hello, hello. This is Minnie Tobias. Henry's right—Oh, Mr. Baxter, I didn't recognize your voice. (*Simpering sweetly*) Just a minute, and I'll ask him. (*Placing hand over mouthpiece*) It's Mr. Baxter, Henry. He wants to know if he can come out. He wants to get a list of the relatives so he can arrange for the cars. And he wondered what music . . .

HENRY. (*Unable to stand conversation about the funeral*) Tell him he can come any time he damn pleases! (*Rushes out the kitchen door.*)

EMMA. Well! (*She freezes the atmosphere with this one word.*)

MINNIE. (*Considerably annoyed and not a little nonplused*) Yes, Mr. Baxter. He says . . . to come . . . any time. (*She hangs up. There is a silence freighted with thoughts left unsaid. Then Emma speaks.*)

EMMA. Is Molly still up in her room?

MINNIE. (*Taking sack of lemons out of cupboard*) Yes, poor thing! She's taken her mother's death awfully hard.

EMMA. She's probably crying her eyes out this very minute. It would be better for her if she'd stay down here and meet folks. (*Goes to kitchen door, swings it open, and yells.*) Molly! Molly!

MINNIE. (*Shocked*) For goodness sakes, Emma, have you gone clean crazy? Hollering at the top of your lungs with Laura a-lying in the next room.

EMMA. (*Sighs*) I'll go get her. T'ain't good for her to brood. (*While she is gone, Minnie fidgets around, putting sandwiches on plate. Surreptitiously she takes a cookie from the table and just manages to gulp it down when Emma returns again.*) Poor thing had been crying all right, but she said she'd come down as soon as she'd freshened up a bit.

MINNIE. (*Squeezing lemons*) Pretty thing, ain't she?

EMMA. And just as sweet as she is pretty. Somehow, in spite of everything, Laura always seemed awful happy having her and doing for other people and working with her flowers. Besides this house is as nice as most of them . . . around here . . . from the outside anyway.

MINNIE. Except for the front door. I'm sure I wouldn't want a house without a finished front door. (*Sniffing as she sits down with a sigh on the kitchen stool.*)

EMMA. (*Tastes lemonade and puts more sugar in it. Sitting down now too*) Queer how he never finished it, wasn't it? Seems sorta heathenish never to have a front door.

MINNIE. It is heathenish. Of course, not many people know the true story of the whole affair. But I, livin' so close and all...

EMMA. Everyone just always laid it up to natural cussedness. 'Course there's been talk...

MINNIE. And none of it true.

EMMA. Some said it was 'cause he's so tight.

MINNIE. (*Settling back comfortably for a nice gossip*) Land knows he's tight enough, but it wasn't that this time. It happened when the workmen was finishing the house fifteen years ago...

EMMA. Fifteen years! My! It hasn't seemed that long since Henry had this house built.

MINNIE. He thought the workmen was poking along so they could get more money, so he went out and cussed them out about it. The foreman sassed him back...

EMMA. Gracious! I'd a-thought he'd a-been afraid to.

MINNIE. And Henry lost his temper and fired every last one of them on the spot. They left without ever fixing the front door, and he boarded it up.

EMMA. And it's been just exactly like they left it from that day to this. What a pity!

MINNIE. Well, if you knew how Laura hankered to have that door finished all these years you'd think it was a greater pity.

EMMA. What are you talking about, Minnie Tobias?

MINNIE. Promise not to tell a soul?

EMMA. (Stoutly) Of course not!

MINNIE. I've always known it, though Laura was too proud ever to say anything about it even to Henry, until I came over here with some beef broth the afternoon before she . . when she was so sick, and she as much as told me then that if her casket . . . (*The dining room door swings open slowly and Molly enters. She is sweet, young, and virginal. She is flaxen-haired and blue-eyed, "sweet as the roses in June" according to Frank Baxter, proprietor of Holdenville's sole furniture and undertaking establishment. Her eyes are red-rimmed now as if she has been crying for a long time.*)

MOLLY. Please, Mrs. Jones, I don't feel like eating anything. (*Dramatizing herself a little as youth does*) I don't . . think I'll ever want anything to eat again. (*She is crying a little again, softly as if she is almost cried out. Minnie goes to her and takes her in her arms very gently.*)

MINNIE. (Murmuring softly) There! There! You mustn't take on like this!

EMMA. (Patting her shoulder) Poor child! You'll make yourself sick. (*They bustle around Molly, put her in a chair, making her comfortable. Molly blows her nose with her sodden wad of a handkerchief and tries to smile at them.*)

MINNIE. There, honey, just sit down and make yourself comfortable.

EMMA. Tain't no sense crying—just makes your eyes all red.

MOLLY. (In a very little voice) My! But you're nice to me!

MINNIE. (*Blowing her nose very hard to cover her emotion*) Pshaw! I ain't done nothing a-tall.

MOLLY. (*Glancing around*) Where's Pa?

EMMA. (*Dryly*) Your pa went outside. He didn't seem to like our company.

MINNIE. (*Going to kitchen door and looking out*) It's time he came in and ate something. I guess he can stand our company if we fix some food for him.

(She goes to table and begins clearing it. There is a knock at the kitchen door, and without waiting for an answer, Frank Baxter, the undertaker enters. He is a short, fat man, red-faced, and consciously cheerful. For twenty years he has been burying the citizens of Holdenville and he has acquired a homely philosophy of living that recognizes and includes death.)

FRANK. Hello! Hello, folks! It's the prettiest summer day you ever seen outside. (*Patting Molly's shoulder gently*) Your ma's flower garden is pretty as a picture. (*Softly*) That'll be your job now—keeping her flowers.

MOLLY. (*Getting up and walking to window*) They'll never grow for me the way they did for her. They seemed to love her and want to grow for her. Seemed like they used to nod and bow to her when she walked in the garden.

EMMA. Well, all I have to say is there wasn't a sweeter woman on God's green earth than Laura Lewis. And if she doesn't have the nicest funeral and the most flowers of any burial in Holdenville yet, then it's because I'm dead and in my grave too. Any woman that loved them flowers like Laura did should have enough she could be buried in them, instead of sod, if necessary.

**MINNIE.** And she ain't going to be carried out the b. . .  
(Suddenly realizing that Molly is still in the room) Molly, you run out and tell your pa to come on in and eat. We're just going to feed you some sandwiches and cake and things. It's too hot for a big meal.

**MOLLY.** (Sullenly, almost as if she is afraid) I don't want to. He can come in when he gets hungry.

**FRANK.** (Worried) Honey, what's the matter? You oughtn't to feel that way about your own pa.

**MOLLY.** I don't care. He's so . . . so . . . Oh, I'll get him.  
(She walks listlessly to the door, pushing back the heavy mop of flaxen hair from her hot forehead as she does so.)

**FRANK.** (Sighs) Poor young one! (Briskly) Well, I've no time to be gabbing along here. I got to get back right away. Has Henry made out a list of the relatives?

**MINNIE.** (Seizing his arm fiercely) See here, Frank Baxter, we got to figure some way to have Laura's casket go out the front door instead of the back.

**FRANK.** (Stopping and taking cookie from table and eating it) Lookee here, Minnie, I ain't no magician. That front door's boarded up.

**MINNIE.** I don't care! It can be unboarded and finished, I guess.

**EMMA.** What for, Minnie? You know Henry'll never do it, not now anyway. He'll say it costs too much.

**MINNIE.** Well, he's going to! I've been trying to get you two together, alone, to tell you, ever since she . . . passed on.

I was over here that last afternoon, and them were her last words to me.

EMMA. (*Impatiently*) What? What were her last words?

MINNIE. (*Impressively*) This is exactly what she said to me, and her so sick she couldn't talk above a whisper: "I could go happy if I thought I'd be carried out the front door." For fifteen years she's wished and pined to have that front door finished even though she *was* too proud to say anything even to me, her nearest neighbor. Now, that she's . . . gone, I guess she can have her way for once. She asked *me* to help her, and I'm going to see that that front door gets fixed.

FRANK. Gosh, Minnie, I didn't know. Shucks, if she wanted it that bad, I guess we can fix it some way.

EMMA. (*Practically*) But how? I wouldn't tell Henry Lewis for the world that . . .

MINNIE. (*Nervously shoving chair under table*) I thought maybe . . . Frank . . . Mr. . .

FRANK. (*Embarrassed*) Aw, pshaw! I can't. . . (*Slapping his knee*) I ain't one to tell a lie, but this time I think the end justifies the means. I'll just tell Henry that the casket won't go out the back door. Then I guess he'll have to finish the front door.

EMMA. Do you think he'll swallow it?

MINNIE. (*Triumphantly*) Of course, he will. I guess that'll fix him.

EMMA. (*Nervously to Frank*) You better go on in there now

and pretend to be a-measuring it. (*Approaching footsteps on the back porch*) They're a-coming now. Go on!

(*Frank disappears through dining room door as Henry and Molly enter through back door. Henry has regained his composure, and now it's Emma and Minnie who are flustered. Both concentrate on finishing setting the table.*)

EMMA. (*Cutting three slices of the chocolate cake*) Well, well, where'd you find him, Molly?

MOLLY. He was working in the flower garden.

HENRY. (*Apologetically*) There was some weeds after the rain last night, so I thought maybe I'd. . (*He remains dangling in the air in his incoherence, and the two women leave him there. Molly is silent.*)

MINNIE. (*Placing plate of sandwiches on table*) There, I guess you can set to. If you want more cake, I'll cut more, but there's no sense cutting it if you're not going to eat it. It just dries out.

EMMA. (*Sitting down on kitchen stool on which she looks like an elephant on a pumpkin*) Frank Baxter's here, Henry, in the other room. He wants a list of the relatives.

HENRY. Saw his car outside. The list is already made out. . in on the table.

EMMA. (*Briskly, getting up*) I'll go get it and give it to him.

(*Henry has taken up a sandwich in his hand and has begun eating it mechanically. It is plain that he, like Molly, is not hungry. The women watch him silently. Suddenly he pushes back his plate.*)

**HENRY.** Guess I ain't so hungry after all. (*He shifts chair away from table, and sits, silent and uncomfortable in his best clothes. His strong hands are clasped in front of him so tightly that the knuckles show white. His legs are apart, and his elbows resting on his knees, throwing his body forward in a position of restlessness. Minnie sniffs contemptuously, but there is no other sound in the room. Emma returns.*)

**EMMA.** I gave it to him.

(*There is another embarrassing silence in which no one can think of anything to say.*)

**EMMA.** My, Henry, you ain't et a thing. You gotta eat to keep up your strength.

(*There is another pause, when Frank enters briskly.*)

**FRANK.** Howdy, Henry. Nice rain we had last night, wasn't it?

**HENRY.** Howdy, Frank.

**FRANK.** I guess everything's fixed except the music. Any preference? (*Henry remains silent*) No. Hmm! "Nearer My God To Thee" then I guess..., or "The Old Rugged Cross".

**MINNIE.** I think "Nearer My God To Thee" is nicest. (*Frank, taking out tapeline and measuring door.*)

**FRANK.** (*Stopping to wipe perspiration from forehead. Sees bucket of water and stops work to take a dipper and get himself a drink of water.*) This well water sure is fine. Like to have a well just like it on my place. Hot, ain't it? (*No one answers him. The two women preserve a strained silence.*)

*Henry is silently brooding. Frank goes back to door and starts measuring it again.)* I thought maybe, just to make sure—I wouldn't want there to be any slips.

MINNIE. (*Fiercely*) Nothing ain't too good or too much trouble for Laura.

(*Henry is stirring restlessly. His eyes are tortured.*)

FRANK. Pshaw! Now ain't that too bad!

EMMA. (*Slyly, a cat pouncing on a rat*) What's the matter, Frank?

FRANK. (*Showing tapeline to Henry*) Just a shame, that's what it is. Lookee here, Hank. I been a-measuring things, and that coffin won't go through this back door with the pallbearers and everything, not decent like.

HENRY. (*Without any apparent emotion*) That's the only way out!

FRANK. Spoils everything, that's what it does, maneuvering through a narrow door.

HENRY. Ain't time enough before tomorrow afternoon anyway.

EMMA. Oh, I guess you could finish it all right if you worked with a night shift. I know my Elmer would be glad to come in and help if you can't get workers enough.

MINNIE. I guess my brother Will would be glad to come too.

HENRY. (*Briefly*) Costs too much! Besides, 'tain't no use. . now.

**FRANK.** What do you mean—cost too much? Getting a good price for your hogs, ain't you? (*Henry remains stubbornly silent*) Great Scott, man, ain't you got no pride?

**HENRY.** Sure, I got pride, but it ain't necessary. (*He is like a huge St. Bernard dog being snapped and hounded at by fox terriers.*)

(*No one has paid any attention to Molly until now when she rises, holding herself proudly erect, her eyes blazing, her cheeks pink.*)

**MOLLY.** I should think now that she's. . dead, you could finish the front door. Mother's never had anything she wanted. She didn't have a piano, or running water, or electric lights. Maybe I oughtn't to blame you because, well, Ma said I should love you and look after you, only *why* can't she have the thing she wanted worst of all, more than a piano even? All her life she slaved and worked and took care of you when she was too sick and frail to look out for her own self even. And now the thing she's talked and dreamed of ever since I can remember, you say costs too much. I think it's. . wicked!

**EMMA.** (*Shocked at this exhibition of youthful rebellion*) Molly!

**MOLLY.** (*Turning, throws herself into a chair and buries her face in her arms on the table*) I don't care, I do! I do!

**HENRY.** (*Rising slowly, dumbly. He looks helplessly around him, his face twitching. His inarticulateness is evidently torture*) Molly, Molly. I. . .

**FRANK.** (*With a fineness of feeling sometimes to be found in the kindly and open-hearted*) If you don't mind, Hank, me and the womenfolks will clear out and leave you two alone.

(*Henry makes no sign of hearing him, and the three silently leave. Minnie gives Molly's shoulder a little pat as she crosses the room.*)

**HENRY.** (*The veins are standing out in his forehead. His eyes are weary and strained*) Laura. . . , your Ma. . . was. . . . I didn't know. . .

**MOLLY.** (*With her head still in her arms*) I'm sorry, Pa. I didn't mean to fly at you. I guess I know you loved her, in your way, only why can't you have the door fixed? (*Wearily*) She wanted it so.

**HENRY.** (*Finding something not dealing with emotions makes him a little more articulate. The sorrow in his deep voice is infinite.*) Why, honey, of course we'll have. . . the front door. . . fixed. You see, I. . well, if I'd just known—I mean if she'd ever told me she wanted it that bad, I'd have fixed it. . fifteen years ago. (*His hand, heavy with years of work but gentle with a love he cannot express any other way falls caressingly, protectingly on the girl's slim shoulder.*)

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